

A woman with dark hair, wearing a red coat over a dark dress, stands on a dirt path in a field. She is looking towards the right. The sky is a mix of deep red and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is dramatic and contemplative.

ELLY
GRIFFITHS

RUTH
GALLOWAY
THE EARLY CASES

'An inspired creation' Louise Penny

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THE CROSSING PLACES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
ALSO AVAILABLE

RUTH GALLOWAY
THE EARLY CASES

Elly Griffiths

Quercus

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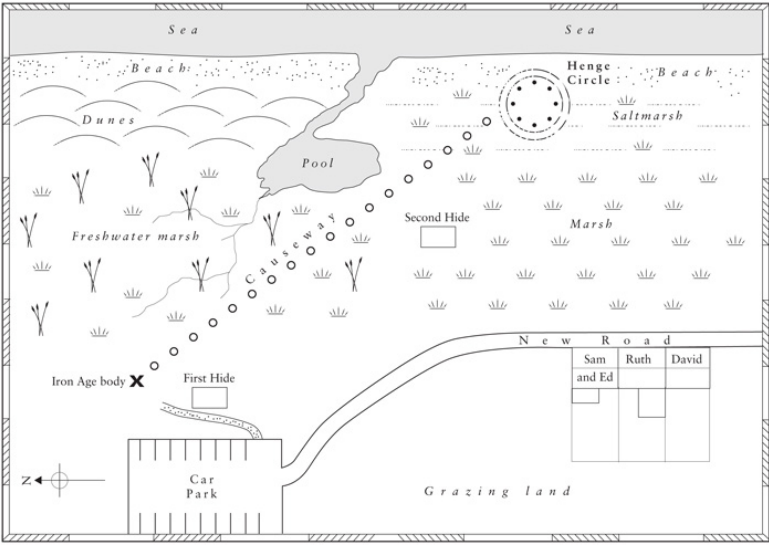
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THE CROSSING PLACES

For Marge



What the sand gets, the sand keeps forever
– Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*

PROLOGUE

They wait for the tide and set out at first light.

It has rained all night and in the morning the ground is seething gently, the mist rising up to join the overhanging clouds. Nelson calls for Ruth in an unmarked police car. He sits beside the driver and Ruth is in the back, like a passenger in a minicab. They drive in silence to the car park near where the bones were first found. As they drive along the Saltmarsh road, the only sounds are the sudden, staccato crackle of the police radio and the driver's heavy, cold-clogged breathing. Nelson says nothing. There is nothing to say.

They get out of the car and walk across the rain-sodden grass towards the marsh. The wind is whispering through the reeds, and here and there they see glimpses of still, sullen water reflecting the grey sky. At the edge of the marshland Ruth stops, looking for the first sunken post, the twisting shingle path that leads through the treacherous water and out to the mudflats. When she finds it, half-submerged by brackish water, she sets out without looking back.

Silently, they cross the marshes. As they get nearer the sea, the mist disperses and the sun starts to filter through the clouds. At the henge circle, the tide is out and the sand glitters in the early morning light. Ruth kneels on the ground as she saw Erik doing all those years ago. Gently, she stirs the quivering mud with her trowel.

Suddenly everything is quiet; even the seabirds stop their mad skirling and calling up above. Or maybe they are still there and she just doesn't hear them. In the background she can hear Nelson breathing hard but Ruth herself feels strangely calm. Even when she sees it, the tiny arm still wearing the christening bracelet, even then she feels nothing.

She had known what she was going to find.

CHAPTER 1

Waking is like rising from the dead. The slow climb out of sleep, shapes appearing out of blackness, the alarm clock ringing like the last trump. Ruth flings out an arm and sends the alarm crashing to the floor, where it carries on ringing reproachfully. Groaning, she levers herself upright and pulls up the blind. Still dark. It's just not right, she tells herself, wincing as her feet touch the cold floorboards. Neolithic man would have gone to sleep when the sun set and woken when it rose. What makes us think this is the right way round? Falling asleep on the sofa during *Newsnight*, then dragging herself upstairs to lie sleepless over a Rebus book, listen to the World Service on the radio, count Iron Age burial sites to make herself sleep and now this; waking in the darkness feeling like death. It just wasn't right somehow.

In the shower, the water unglues her eyes and sends her hair streaming down her back. This is baptism, if you like. Ruth's parents are Born Again Christians and are fans of Full Immersion For Adults (capitals obligatory). Ruth can quite see the attraction, apart from the slight problem of not believing in God. Still, her parents are Praying For Her (capitals again), which should be a comfort but somehow isn't.

Ruth rubs herself vigorously with a towel and stares unseeingly into the steamy mirror. She knows what she will see and the knowledge is no more comforting than her parents' prayers. Shoulder-length brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin – and however she stands on the scales, which are at present banished to the broom cupboard – she weighs twelve and a half stone. She sighs (I am not defined by my weight, fat is a state of mind) and squeezes toothpaste onto her brush. She has a very beautiful smile, but she isn't smiling now and so this too is low on the list of comforts.

Clean, damp-footed, she pads back into the bedroom. She has lectures today so will have to dress slightly more formally than usual. Black trousers, black shapeless top. She hardly looks as she selects the clothes. She likes colour and fabric; in fact she has quite a weakness for sequins, bugle beads and diamanté. You wouldn't know this from her wardrobe though. A dour row of

dark trousers and loose, dark jackets. The drawers in her pine dressing table are full of black jumpers, long cardigans and opaque tights. She used to wear jeans until she hit size sixteen and now favours cords, black, of course. Jeans are too young for her anyhow. She will be forty next year.

Dressed, she negotiates the stairs. The tiny cottage has very steep stairs, more like a ladder than anything else. 'I'll never be able to manage those' her mother had said on her one and only visit. Who's asking you to, Ruth had replied silently. Her parents had stayed at the local B and B as Ruth has only one bedroom; going upstairs was strictly unnecessary (there is a downstairs loo but it is by the kitchen, which her mother considers unsanitary). The stairs lead directly into the sitting room: sanded wooden floor, comfortable faded sofa, large flat-screen TV, books covering every available surface. Archaeology books mostly but also murder mysteries, cookery books, travel guides, doctor-nurse romances. Ruth is nothing if not eclectic in her tastes. She has a particular fondness for children's books about ballet or horse-riding, neither of which she has ever tried.

The kitchen barely has room for a fridge and a cooker but Ruth, despite the books, rarely cooks. Now she switches on the kettle and puts bread into the toaster, clicking on Radio 4 with a practised hand. Then she collects her lecture notes and sits at the table by the front window. Her favourite place. Beyond her front garden with its windblown grass and broken blue fence there is nothingness. Just miles and miles of marshland, spotted with stunted gorse bushes and criss-crossed with small, treacherous streams. Sometimes, at this time of year, you see great flocks of wild geese wheeling across the sky, their feathers turning pink in the rays of the rising sun. But today, on this grey winter morning, there is not a living creature as far as the eye can see. Everything is pale and washed out, grey-green merging to grey-white as the marsh meets the sky. Far off is the sea, a line of darker grey, seagulls riding in on the waves. It is utterly desolate and Ruth has absolutely no idea why she loves it so much.

She eats her toast and drinks her tea (she prefers coffee but is saving herself for a proper espresso at the university). As she does so, she leafs through her lecture notes, originally typewritten but now scribbled over with a palimpsest of additional notes in different coloured pens. 'Gender and Prehistoric Technology',

‘Excavating Artefacts’, ‘Life and Death in the Mesolithic’, ‘The Role of Animal Bone in Excavations’. Although it is only early November, the Christmas term will soon be over and this will be her last week of lectures. Briefly, she conjures up the faces of her students: earnest, hard-working, slightly dull. She only teaches postgraduates these days and rather misses the casual, hungover good humour of the undergraduates. Her students are so *keen*, waylaying her after lectures to talk about Lindow Man and Boxgrove Man and whether women really would have played a significant role in prehistoric society. Look around you, she wants to shout, we don’t always play a significant role in *this* society. Why do you think a gang of grunting hunter-gatherers would have been any more enlightened than we?

Thought for the Day seeps into her unconscious, reminding her that it is time to leave. ‘In some ways, God is like an iPod ...’ She puts her plate and cup in the sink and leaves down food for her cats, Sparky and Flint. As she does so, she answers the ever-present sardonic interviewer in her head. ‘OK, I’m a single, overweight woman on my own and I have cats. What’s the big deal? And, OK, sometimes I do speak to them but I don’t imagine that they answer back and I don’t pretend that I’m any more to them than a convenient food dispenser.’ Right on cue, Flint, a large ginger Tom, squeezes himself through the cat flap and fixes her with an unblinking, golden stare.

‘Does God feature on our Recently Played list or do we sometimes have to press Shuffle?’

Ruth strokes Flint and goes back into the sitting room to put her papers into her rucksack. She winds a red scarf (her only concession to colour: even fat people can buy scarves) round her neck and puts on her anorak. Then she turns out the lights and leaves the cottage.

Ruth’s cottage is one in a line of three on the edge of the Saltmarsh. One is occupied by the warden of the bird sanctuary, the other by weekenders who come down in summer, have lots of toxic barbecues and park their 4 × 4 in front of Ruth’s view. The road is frequently flooded in spring and autumn and often impassable by midwinter. ‘Why don’t you live somewhere more convenient?’ her colleagues ask. ‘There are some lovely properties in King’s Lynn, or even Blakeney if you want to be near to nature.’ Ruth can’t explain, even to herself, how a girl born and

brought up in South London can feel such a pull to these inhospitable marshlands, these desolate mudflats, this lonely, unrelenting view. It was research that first brought her to the Saltmarsh but she doesn't know herself what it is that makes her stay, in the face of so much opposition. 'I'm used to it,' is all she says. 'Anyway the cats would hate to move.' And they laugh. Good old Ruth, devoted to her cats, child-substitutes of course, shame she never got married, she's really very pretty when she smiles.

Today, though, the road is clear, with only the ever-present wind blowing a thin line of salt onto her windscreen. She squirts water without noticing it, bumps slowly over the cattle grid and negotiates the twisting road that leads to the village. In summer the trees meet overhead, making this a mysterious green tunnel. But today the trees are mere skeletons, their bare arms stretching up to the sky. Ruth, driving slightly faster than is prudent, passes the four houses and boarded-up pub that constitute the village and takes the turning for King's Lynn. Her first lecture is at ten. She has plenty of time.

Ruth teaches at the University of North Norfolk (UNN is the unprepossessing acronym), a new university just outside King's Lynn. She teaches archaeology, which is a new discipline there, specialising in forensic archaeology, which is newer still. Phil, her head of department, frequently jokes that there is nothing new about archaeology and Ruth always smiles dutifully. It is only a matter of time, she thinks, before Phil gets himself a bumper sticker. 'Archaeologists dig it.' 'You're never too old for an archaeologist.' Her special interest is bones. Why didn't the skeleton go to the ball? Because he had no body to dance with. She has heard them all but she still laughs every time. Last year her students bought her a life-size cut-out of Bones from *Star Trek*. He stands at the top of her stairs, terrifying the cats.

On the radio someone is discussing life after death. Why do we feel the need to create a heaven? Is this a sign that there is one or just wishful thinking on a massive scale? Ruth's parents talk about heaven as if it is very familiar, a kind of cosmic shopping centre where they will know their way around and have free passes for the park-and-ride, and where Ruth will languish forever in the underground car park. Until she is Born Again, of course. Ruth prefers the Catholic heaven, remembered from

student trips to Italy and Spain. Vast cloudy skies, incense and smoke, darkness and mystery. Ruth likes the Vast: paintings by John Martin, the Vatican, the Norfolk sky. Just as well, she thinks wryly as she negotiates the turn into the university grounds.

The university consists of long, low buildings, linked by glass walkways. On grey mornings like this it looks inviting, the buttery light shining out across the myriad car parks, a row of dwarf lamps lighting the way to the Archaeology and Natural Sciences Building. Closer to, it looks less impressive. Though the building is only ten years old, cracks are appearing in the concrete façade, there is graffiti on the walls and a good third of the dwarf lamps don't work. Ruth hardly notices this, however, as she parks in her usual space and hauls out her heavy rucksack – heavy because it is half-full of bones.

Climbing the dank-smelling staircase to her office, she thinks about her first lecture: First Principles in Excavation. Although they are postgraduates, many of her students will have little or no first-hand experience of digs. Many are from overseas (the university needs the fees) and the frozen East Anglian earth will be quite a culture shock for them. This is why they won't do their first official dig until April.

As she scrabbles for her key card in the corridor, she is aware of two people approaching her. One is Phil, the Head of Department, the other she doesn't recognise. He is tall and dark, with greying hair cut very short and there is something hard about him, something contained and slightly dangerous that makes her think that he can't be a student and certainly not a lecturer. She stands aside to let them pass but, to her surprise, Phil stops in front of her and speaks in a serious voice which nevertheless contains an ill-concealed edge of excitement.

'Ruth. There's someone who wants to meet you.'

A student after all, then. Ruth starts to paste a welcoming smile on her face but it is frozen by Phil's next words.

'This is Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson. He wants to talk to you about a murder.'

CHAPTER 2

‘Suspected murder,’ Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson says quickly.

‘Yes, yes,’ says Phil, just as quickly, shooting a look at Ruth as if to say, ‘Look at me talking to a real detective.’ Ruth keeps her face impassive.

‘This is Doctor Ruth Galloway,’ says Phil. ‘She’s our forensics expert.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ says Nelson without smiling. He gestures towards the locked door of Ruth’s office. ‘Can we?’

Ruth slides in her key card and pushes open the door. Her office is tiny, barely six feet across. One wall is entirely taken up by bookshelves, another by the door and a third by a grubby window with a view of an even grubbier ornamental lake. Ruth’s desk squats against the fourth wall, with a framed poster of Indiana Jones – ironical, she always explains hastily – hanging over it. When she has tutorials the students frequently spill out into the corridor and she props the door open with her cat doorstep, a present from Peter. But now she slams the door shut and Phil and the detective stand there awkwardly, looking too big for the space. Nelson, in particular, seems to block out all the light as he stands, scowling, in front of the window. He looks too broad, too tall, too *grown up* for the room.

‘Please ...’ Ruth gestures to the chairs stacked by the door. Phil makes a great performance of giving Nelson his chair first, practically wiping away the dust with his jumper sleeve.

Ruth squeezes behind her desk, which gives her an illusion of security, of being in charge. This illusion is instantly shattered when Nelson leans back, crosses his legs and addresses her in a brisk monotone. He has a slight Northern accent, which only serves to make him sound more efficient, as if he hasn’t time for the slow vowels of Norfolk.

‘We’ve found some bones,’ he says. ‘They seem to be a child’s but they look old. I need to know how old.’

Ruth is silent but Phil chips in eagerly. ‘Where did you find them, Inspector?’

‘Near the bird sanctuary. Saltmarsh.’

Phil looks at Ruth. 'But that's right where you ...'

'I know it,' Ruth cuts in. 'What makes you think the bones look old?'

'They're brown, discoloured, but they look in good condition. I thought that was your area,' he says, suddenly aggressive.

'It is,' says Ruth calmly. 'I assume that's why you're here?'

'Well, would you be able to tell if they are modern or not?' asks Nelson, again sounding rather belligerent.

'A recent discovery is usually obvious,' says Ruth, 'you can tell by appearance and surface. Older bones are more tricky.

Sometimes it's almost impossible to tell fifty-year-old bones from two-thousand-year-old. You need radiocarbon dating for that.'

'Professor Galloway is an expert on bone preservation.' This is Phil again, anxious not to be left out. 'She's worked in Bosnia, on the war graves ...'

'Will you come and look?' Nelson interrupts.

Ruth pretends to consider but, of course, she is utterly fascinated. Bones! On the Saltmarsh! Where she did that first unforgettable dig with Erik. It could be anything. It could be a find. It could be ...

'You suspect it's a murder?' she asks.

Nelson looks uncomfortable for the first time. 'I'd rather not say,' he says heavily, 'not at the present time. Will you come and look?'

Ruth stands up. 'I've got a lecture at ten. I could come in my lunch break.'

'I'll send a car for you at twelve,' says Nelson.

*

Much to Ruth's secret disappointment, Nelson does not send a police car complete with flashing blue light. Instead he appears himself, driving a muddy Mercedes. She is waiting, as agreed, by the main gate, and he does not even get out of the car but merely leans over and opens the passenger door. Ruth climbs in, feeling fat, as she always does in cars. She has a morbid dread of the seatbelt not fitting around her or of some invisible weight sensor setting off a shrill alarm. 'Twelve and a half stone! Twelve and a half stone in car! Emergency! Press ejector button.'

Nelson glances at Ruth's rucksack. 'Got everything you need?'

‘Yes.’ She has brought her instant excavation kit: pointing trowel, small hand shovel, plastic freezer bags for samples, tapes, notebook, pencils, paint brushes, compass, digital camera. She has also changed into trainers and is wearing a reflective jacket. She is annoyed to find herself thinking that she must look a complete mess.

‘So you live out Saltmarsh way?’ Nelson says, pulling out across the traffic with a squeal of tyres. He drives like a maniac.

‘Yes,’ says Ruth, feeling defensive though she doesn’t know why. ‘New Road.’

‘New Road!’ Nelson lets out a bark of laughter. ‘I thought only twitchers lived out there.’

‘Well, the warden of the bird sanctuary is one of my neighbours,’ says Ruth, struggling to remain polite while keeping one foot clamped on an imaginary brake.

‘I wouldn’t fancy it,’ says Nelson. ‘Too isolated.’

‘I like it,’ says Ruth. ‘I did a dig there and never left.’

‘A dig? Archaeology?’

‘Yes.’ Ruth is remembering that summer, ten years ago. Sitting around the campfire in the evenings, eating burnt sausages and singing corny songs. The sound of birdsong in the mornings and the marsh blooming purple with sea lavender. The time when sheep trampled their tents at night. The time when Peter got stranded out on the tidal marsh and Erik had to rescue him, crawling on his hands and knees across the mudflats. The unbelievable excitement when they found that first wooden post, proof that the henge actually existed. She remembers the exact sound of Erik’s voice as he turned and shouted at them across the incoming tide, ‘We’ve found it!’

She turns to Nelson. ‘We were looking for a henge.’

‘A henge? Like Stonehenge?’

‘Yes. All it means is a circular bank with a ditch around it. Usually with posts inside the circle.’

‘I read somewhere that Stonehenge is just a big sundial. A way of telling the time.’

‘Well, we don’t know exactly what it was for,’ says Ruth, ‘but it’s safe to say that it involves ritual of some kind.’

Nelson shoots a strange look at her.

‘Ritual?’

‘Yes, worship, offerings, sacrifices.’

‘Sacrifices?’ echoes Nelson. He seems genuinely interested now, the faintly condescending note has disappeared from his voice.

‘Well, sometimes we find evidence of sacrifices. Pots, spears, animal bones.’

‘What about human bones? Do you ever find human bones?’

‘Yes, sometimes human bones.’

There is silence and then Nelson says, ‘Funny place for one of those henge things, isn’t it? Right out to sea.’

‘This wasn’t sea then. Landscape changes. Only ten thousand years ago this country was still linked to the continent. You could walk from here to Scandinavia.’

‘You’re joking!’

‘No. King’s Lynn was once a huge tidal lake. That’s what Lynn means. It’s the Celtic word for lake.’

Nelson turns to look sceptically at her, causing the car to swerve alarmingly. Ruth wonders if he suspects her of making the whole thing up.

‘So if this area wasn’t sea, what was it?’

‘Flat marshland. We think the henge was on the edge of a marsh.’

‘Still seems a funny place to build something like that.’

‘Marshland is very important in prehistory,’ explains Ruth, ‘it’s a kind of symbolic landscape. We think that it was important because it’s a link between the land and the sea, or between life and death.’

Nelson snorts. ‘Come again?’

‘Well, marsh isn’t dry land and it isn’t sea. It’s a sort of mixture of both. We know it was important to prehistoric man.’

‘How do we know?’

‘We’ve found objects left on the edge of marshes. Votive hoards.’

‘Votive?’

‘Offerings to the Gods, left at special or sacred places. And sometimes bodies. Have you heard of bog bodies? Lindow Man?’

‘Might have,’ says Nelson cautiously.

‘Bodies buried in peat are almost perfectly preserved, but some people think the bodies were buried in the bogs for a purpose. To appease the Gods.’

Nelson shoots her another look but says nothing. They are approaching the Saltmarsh now, driving up from the lower road

towards the visitor car park. Notices listing the various birds to be found on the marshes stand around forlornly, battered by the wind. A boarded-up kiosk advertises ice-creams, their lurid colours faded now. It seems impossible to imagine people picnicking here, enjoying ice-creams in the sun. The place seems made for the wind and the rain.

The car park is empty apart from a solitary police car. The occupant gets out as they approach and stands there, looking cold and fed up.

‘Doctor Ruth Galloway,’ Nelson introduces briskly, ‘Detective Sergeant Clough.’

DS Clough nods glumly. Ruth gets the impression that hanging about on a windy marshland is not his favourite way of passing the time. Nelson, though, looks positively eager, jogging slightly on the spot like a racehorse in sight of the gallops. He leads the way along a gravel path marked ‘Visitor’s Trail’. They pass a wooden hide, built on stilts over the marsh. It is empty, apart from some crisp wrappers and an empty can of coke lying on the surrounding platform.

Nelson, without stopping, points at the litter and barks, ‘Bag it.’ Ruth has to admire his thoroughness, if not his manners. It occurs to her that police work must be rather similar to archaeology. She, too, would bag anything found at a site, labelling it carefully to give it a context. She, too, would be prepared to search for days, weeks, in the hope of finding something significant. She, too, she realises with a sudden shiver, is primarily concerned with death.

Ruth is out of breath before they find the spot marked out with the blue and white police tape that reminds her of traffic accidents. Nelson is now some ten yards ahead, hands in pockets, head forward as if sniffing the air. Clough plods behind him, holding a plastic bag containing the rubbish from the hide.

Beyond the tape is a shallow hole, half-filled by muddy water. Ruth ducks under the tape and kneels down to look. Clearly visible in the rich mud are human bones.

‘How did you find this?’ she asks.

It is Clough who answers. ‘Member of the public, walking her dog. Animal actually had one of the bones in its mouth.’

‘Did you keep it? The bone, I mean.’

‘It’s at the station.’

Ruth takes a quick photo of the site and sketches a brief map in her notebook. This is the far west of the marsh; she has never dug here before. The beach, where the henge was found, is about two miles away to the east. Squatting down on the muddy soil, she begins laboriously bailing out the water, using a plastic beaker from her excavation kit. Nelson is almost hopping with impatience.

‘Can’t we help with that?’ he asks.

‘No,’ says Ruth shortly.

When the hole is almost free from water, Ruth’s heart starts to beat faster. Carefully she scoops out another beakerful of water and only then reaches into the mud and exposes something that is pressed flat against the dark soil.

‘Well?’ Nelson is leaning eagerly over her shoulder.

‘It’s a body,’ says Ruth hesitantly, ‘but ...’

Slowly she reaches for her trowel. She mustn’t rush things. She has seen entire excavations ruined because of one moment’s carelessness. So, with Nelson grinding his teeth beside her, she gently lifts away the sodden soil. A hand, slightly clenched, wearing a bracelet of what looks like grass, lies exposed in the trench.

‘Bloody hell!’ murmurs Nelson over her shoulder.

She is working almost in a trance now. She plots the find on her map, noting which way it is facing. Next she takes a photograph and starts to dig again.

This time her trowel grates against metal. Still working slowly and meticulously, Ruth reaches down and pulls the object free from the mud. It gleams dully in the winter light, the sixpence in the Christmas cake: a lump of twisted metal, semi-circular in shape.

‘What’s that?’ Nelson’s voice seems to come from another world.

‘I think it’s a torque,’ says Ruth dreamily.

‘What the hell’s that?’

‘A necklace. Probably from the Iron Age.’

‘The Iron Age? When was that?’

‘About two thousand years ago,’ says Ruth.

Clough lets out a sudden bark of laughter. Nelson turns away without a word.

Nelson gives Ruth a lift back to the university. He seems sunk in gloom but Ruth is in a state of high excitement. An Iron Age body, because the bodies must surely be from the Iron Age, that time of ritual slaughter and fabulous treasure hoards. What does it mean? It's a long way from the henge but could the two discoveries possibly be linked? The henge is early Bronze Age, over a thousand years before the Iron Age. But surely another find on the same site can't simply be coincidence? She can't wait to tell Phil. Perhaps they should inform the press; the publicity might be just what the Department needs.

Nelson says suddenly, 'You're sure about the date?'

'I'm pretty sure about the torque, that's definitely Iron Age and it seems logical that the body was buried with it. But we can do carbon 14 dating to be sure.'

'What's that?'

'Carbon 14 is present in the earth's atmosphere. Plants take it in, animals eat the plants, we eat the animals. So we all absorb carbon 14 and, when we die, we stop absorbing it and the carbon 14 in our bones starts to break down. So, by measuring the amount of carbon 14 left in a bone, we can tell its age.'

'How accurate is it?'

'Well, cosmic radiation can skew the findings – sun spots, solar flares, nuclear testing, that sort of thing. But it can be accurate within a range of a few hundred years. So we'll be able to tell if the bones are roughly from the Iron Age.'

'Which was when exactly?'

'I can't be that exact but roughly seven hundred BC to forty-three AD.'

Nelson is silent for a moment, taking this in, and then he asks, 'Why would an Iron Age body be buried here?'

'As an offering to the Gods. Possibly it would have been staked down. Did you see the grass around the wrist? That could have been a rope of some kind.'

'Jesus. Staked down and left to die?'

'Well maybe, or maybe it was dead before they left it here. The stakes would be just to keep it in place.'

'Jesus,' he says again.

Suddenly Ruth remembers why she is here, in this police car,

with this man. 'Why did you think the bones might be modern?' she asks.

Nelson sighs. 'Some ten years ago there was a child that went missing. Near here. We never found the body. I thought it might be her.'

'Her?'

'Her name was Lucy Downey.'

Ruth is silent. Having a name makes it all more real somehow. After all, hadn't the archaeologist who discovered the first modern human given her a name? Funnily enough, she was called Lucy too.

Nelson sighs again. 'There were letters sent to me about the Lucy Downey case. It's funny, what you said earlier.'

'What?' asks Ruth, rather bemused.

'About ritual and that. There was all sorts of rubbish in the letters but one thing they said was that Lucy had been a sacrifice and that we'd find her where the earth meets the sky.'

'Where the earth meets the sky,' Ruth repeats. 'But that could be anywhere.'

'Yes, but this place, it feels like the end of the world somehow. That's why, when I heard that bones had been found ...'

'You thought they might be hers?'

'Yes. It's hard for the parents when they don't know.

Sometimes, finding a body, it gives them a chance to grieve.'

'You're sure she's dead then?'

Nelson is silent for a moment before replying, concentrating on overtaking a lorry on the inside. 'Yes,' he says at last. 'Five-year-old child, goes missing in November, no sign of her for ten years. She's dead alright.'

'November?'

'Yes. Almost ten years ago to the day.'

Ruth thinks of November, the darkening nights, the wind howling over the marshes. She thinks of the parents, waiting, praying for their daughter's return, jumping at every phone call, hoping that every day might bring news. The slow ebbing away of hope, the dull certainty of loss.

'The parents,' she asks. 'Do they still live nearby?'

'Yes, they live out Fakenham way.' He swerves to avoid a lorry. Ruth closes her eyes. 'Cases like this,' he goes on, 'it's usually the parents.'

Ruth is shocked. 'The parents who killed the child?'

Nelson's voice is matter-of-fact, the Northern vowels very flat. 'Nine cases out of ten. You get the parents all distraught, news conferences, floods of tears and then we find the child buried in the back garden.'

'How awful.'

'Yes. But this case, I don't know, I'm sure it wasn't them. They were a nice couple, not young, been trying for a baby for years and then Lucy came along. They adored her.'

'How dreadful for them,' says Ruth inadequately.

'Dreadful, yes.' Nelson's voice is expressionless. 'But they never blamed us. Never blamed me or the team. They still send me Christmas cards. That's why I—' He falters for a second. 'That's why I wanted a result for them.'

They are at the university now. Nelson screeches to a halt outside the Natural Sciences building. Students hurrying to lectures turn and stare. Although it is only two-thirty, it is already getting dark.

'Thanks for the lift,' says Ruth slightly awkwardly. 'I'll get the bones dated for you.'

'Thanks,' says Nelson. He looks at Ruth for what seems to be the first time. She is acutely aware of her wild hair and mud-stained clothes. 'This discovery, might it be important for you?'

'Yes,' says Ruth. 'It might be.'

'Glad someone's happy.' As soon as Ruth is out of the car he drives off without saying goodbye. She doesn't think she will ever see him again.

CHAPTER 3

Nelson cuts across two lanes of traffic as he heads into King's Lynn. His car is unmarked but he makes it a point of honour always to drive as if he is pursuing a suspect. He enjoys the expressions on the faces of the clueless uniforms when, after pulling them in for speeding, he flourishes his warrant card. In any case, this route is so familiar that he could drive it in his sleep: past the industrial park and the Campbell's soup factory, along the London Road and through the archway in the old city wall. Doctor Ruth Galloway would be sure to tell him exactly how old this wall is: 'I can't be that exact but I estimate that it was built before lunch on Friday 1 February 1556'. But, to Nelson, it just represents a final traffic jam before he reaches the police station.

He is no fan of his adopted county. He is a northerner, born in Blackpool, within sight of the Golden Mile. He went to the Catholic grammar school, St Joseph's (Holy Joe's as it was known locally) and joined the police as a cadet, aged sixteen. Right from the start, he'd loved the job. He loved the camaraderie, the long hours, the physical exertion, the sense of doing something worthwhile. And, though he would never admit it, he'd even liked the paperwork. Nelson is methodical, he likes lists and schedules, he is excellent at cutting through crap. He'd risen through the ranks and soon had a pretty good life: satisfying work, congenial mates, pub on Friday nights, the match on Saturdays, golf on Sundays.

But then the job in Norfolk had come up and his wife, Michelle, had been on at him to take it. Promotion, more money, and 'the chance to live in the country'. Who in their right mind, thinks Nelson, thinking of the Saltmarsh, would want to live in the bloody country? It's all cows and mud and locals who look like the result of several generations of keeping it in the family. But he'd given in and they had moved to King's Lynn. Michelle had started working for a posh hairdressing salon. They'd sent the girls to private schools and they'd come back laughing at his accent ('It's not bath, Daddy, it's ba-arth ...'). He'd done well, become a detective inspector in double quick time, people had

even talked of higher things. Until Lucy Downey went missing.

Nelson turns, without indicating, into the station car park. He is thinking of Lucy and of the body on the marsh. He had always been sure that Lucy was buried somewhere near the Saltmarsh, and when the bones were found he thought that he was near an ending at last. Not a happy ending, but at least an ending. And now this Doctor Ruth Galloway tells him that the bones are from some bloody Stone Age body. Jesus, all that stuff she'd spouted about henges and burials and being able to walk to Scandinavia. He'd thought she was taking the piss at first. But, when they got to the site, he could see she was a professional. He admired the way that she did everything slowly and carefully, making notes, taking photos, sifting the evidence. It's the way that police work should be done. Not that she'd ever make a policewoman. Too overweight, for one thing. What would Michelle say about a woman so out-of-condition that she is out of breath after a five-minute walk? She would be genuinely horrified. But, then, he can't think of any situation in which Michelle would meet Doctor Ruth Galloway. She's not likely to start popping into the salon, not from what he could see of her hair.

But she interests him. Like all forceful people (he calls it forceful rather than bullying), he prefers people who stand up to him, but in his job that doesn't happen often. People either despise him or kowtow to him. Ruth had done neither. She had looked him in the face, coolly, as an equal. He thinks he's never met anyone, any *woman*, quite as sure of themselves as Ruth Galloway. Even the way she dresses – baggy clothes, trainers – seemed to be a way of saying that she doesn't care what anyone thinks. She's not going to tart herself up in skirts and high heels just to please men. Not that there's anything wrong with pleasing men, muses Nelson, kicking open the door to his office, but there's something interesting, even refreshing, about a woman who doesn't care whether or not she's attractive.

And the things she said about ritual were interesting too. Nelson is frowning as he sits behind his desk. Talking about ritual and sacrifice and all that crap has brought it all back: the days and nights spent in fingertip searches, the anguished meetings with the parents, the gradual, unbearable shift from hope to despair, the station full to bursting point, teams brought in from six different forces, all dedicated to finding one little girl. All in

vain.

Nelson sighs. However much he tries not to, he knows that, before he goes home tonight, he will read through the Lucy Downey files.

*

It is pitch black by the time Ruth drives home, edging her car carefully along New Road. There are ditches on both sides of the road and the merest twitch on the wheel can send you plunging ignominiously downwards. This has happened to Ruth once before and she is not keen to repeat the experience. Her headlights illuminate the raised tarmac of the road; the land drops away on either side so that she seems to be driving into nothingness. Nothing but the road ahead and the sky above. *Where the earth meets the sky.* She shivers and turns on the car radio. Radio 4, soothing, civilised and slightly smug, fills the car. 'And now for the News Quiz ...'

Ruth parks outside her broken blue fence and pulls her rucksack out of the boot. The weekenders' house is in darkness but the warden has a light on upstairs. She assumes he goes to bed early so as to be up for the dawn chorus. Flint appears on her doorstep mewing piteously for admittance even though he has his own cat-flap and has, in fact, been snoozing inside all day. Remembering she hasn't yet seen Sparky, Ruth feels a pang of anxiety as she opens the door. But Sparky, a small black cat with a white nose, is sleeping safely on the sofa. Ruth calls her but she stays put, flexing her claws and shutting her eyes. Sparky is a reserved character, quite unlike Flint who is now weaving ecstatically around Ruth's legs.

'Stop it, you stupid cat.'

She drops her rucksack on the table and puts down food for the cats. Her answer phone light is flashing. She has a feeling that it won't be good news and when she presses PLAY she is right. Her mother's voice, aggrieved and slightly breathless, fills the room.

'... whether you're coming for Christmas. Really, Ruth, you could be a bit more considerate. I heard from Simon weeks ago. I assume you'll be coming because I can't imagine you'll want to spend Christmas on your own in that awful ...'

Ruth clicks DELETE, breathing hard. In just a few short sentences

her mother has managed to encapsulate years of irritation and subtle put-down. The accusation of inconsiderate behaviour, the comparison with the perfect Simon, the implication that, if she doesn't visit her parents, Ruth's Christmas will consist of an M & S meal for one in front of the TV. Angrily sloshing wine into a glass (her mother's voice: 'How are your units Ruth? Daddy and I are worried you're getting dependent ...'), Ruth composes a reply. She will never give it in person but it is comforting to stomp around the kitchen, cutting her mother down to size with thin slices of logic.

'The reason I haven't told you about Christmas is that I dread coming home and hearing you drone on about the Christ child and the true meaning of Christmas. Simon has been in touch because he's a creep and an arse-licker. And if I don't come home I'll be with my friends or on some tropical island, not alone slumped in front of *The Vicar of Dibley*. And my house isn't awful, it's a hundred times better than your Eltham semi with its pine cladding and vile china ornaments. And Peter didn't finish with me, I finished with him.'

She has added the last one because she knows from experience that her mother will bring up the subject of Peter sometime over Christmas. 'Peter sent us a card ... such a shame ... do you ever hear? ... you know he's married now?' That her daughter could voluntarily end a relationship with a nice-looking, eligible man is something that Ruth's mother will never be able to accept. Ruth noticed the same tendency in her friends and colleagues when she announced that she and Peter were no longer together. 'I'm so sorry ... Has he found someone else? ... Don't worry, he'll come back ...' Ruth explained patiently that she had ended the relationship five years ago for the simple, yet surprisingly complicated, reason that she no longer loved him. 'That's right,' people would say, ignoring her, 'he'll soon get bored with the new woman. In the meantime, pamper yourself, have a massage, maybe even lose some ...'

To cheer herself up, Ruth boils the water for some nice, fattening pasta and rings Erik. Her first tutor, Erik Anderssen, predictably nicknamed Erik the Viking, was the man responsible for getting her into forensic archaeology. He has been a huge influence on her life and is now a close friend. Smiling, she conjures him up: silver-blond hair pulled back in a pony tail,

faded jeans, unravelling sweater. She knows he will be passionately interested in today's find.

Erik the Viking has, appropriately enough, moved back to Norway. Ruth visited him last summer, in his log cabin by the lake – freezing morning swims followed by steaming saunas, Magda's wonderful food, talking to Erik about Mayan civilisation as the stars came out at night. Madga, his wife, a voluptuous blonde goddess whose beauty manages to make you feel better, not worse, about yourself, is another good friend. *She* never once mentioned Peter, even though she had been there that summer when Ruth and Peter first fell in love; had, in fact, by her tact and gentle benevolence, actually brought them together.

But Erik is out. Ruth leaves a message and, feeling restless, gets the battered lump of metal out of her rucksack and examines it. Still in its freezer bag, carefully dated and labelled, it stares back at her. Phil wanted her to leave it in the Department safe but she refused. She had wanted to bring the torque home, to the Saltmarsh, at least for one night. Now she examines it under her desk light.

Stained dark green from its long immersion in the marsh, the metal nonetheless has a burnished sheen that looks like it might be gold. A gold torque! How much would that be worth? She thinks of the so-called 'marriage torc' found near here, at Snettisham. That had been a wonderful, elaborate object, showing a human face with a ring through its mouth. This piece is more battered, perhaps it has been broken by ploughing or digging. However, squinting closely, she can just see a twisted pattern, almost like a plait. The piece in her hand is barely fifteen centimetres long but she can imagine it as a full half-circle, imagine it round the neck of some savage beauty. Or round the neck of a child, a sacrificial victim?

She remembers Nelson's bitter disappointment when he learnt that the bones were not those of Lucy Downey. What must it feel like to have those deaths, those ghosts, forever on your mind? Ruth knows that for him the Iron Age bones are an annoyance, an irrelevancy, but for her they are as real as the five-year-old girl who went missing all those years ago. Why were the bones left on the edges of the marsh? Was she (from their size, Ruth thinks the bones are female but she cannot be sure) left for dead, sinking in the treacherous mud? Or was she killed somewhere else and

buried at the start of the marshland, to mark the beginning of the sacred landscape?

When her pasta is cooked Ruth eats it at the table by the window, Erik's book *The Shivering Sand* propped up in front of her. The title is from *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins and Ruth turns again to the first page where Erik quotes Collins' description of the sands:

The last of the evening light was fading away; and over all the desolate place there hung a still and awful calm. The heave of the main ocean on the great sand-bank out in the bay, was a heave that made no sound. The inner sea lay lost and dim, without a breath of wind to stir it. Patches of nasty ooze floated, yellow-white on the dead surface of the water. Scum and slime shone faintly in certain places, where the last of the light still caught them on the two great spits of rock jutting out, north and south, into the sea. It was now the time of the turn of the tide: and even as I stood there waiting, the broad brown face of the quicksand began to dimple and quiver – the only moving thing in all the horrid place.

Collins, surely, had understood about the ritual landscape of the sea and land and of the haunted, uncanny places that lie between the two. Ruth remembers that at least one character in *The Moonstone* meets their death on the sands. She remembers another phrase, 'What the Sand gets, the Sand keeps forever.' But the Saltmarsh had given up some of its secrets; first the henge and now this body, just waiting there for Ruth to discover them. Surely there *must* be a link.

Reading again about the discovery of the henge (Erik wrote at least three books on the strength of the find), Ruth remembers how eerie it had looked in that first morning light, like a shipwreck that had risen silently to the surface, the wooden posts forming a sombre ring, black against the sky. She remembers Erik telling fireside stories about Norse water spirits: the Nixes, shape-shifters who lure unwary travellers into the water; the Nokke, river sprites who sing at dawn and dusk. Water as a source of life and a place of death. Water is also often associated with women; women with vengeance in their hearts, luring men to a watery grave. Drowned spirits, their hair flowing green around them,

their webbed hands reaching out above the turning tide ...

Ruth reads on, her pasta forgotten. She has no lectures tomorrow; she will go back to the place where the bones were buried.

*

But in the morning it is raining, driving, slanting rain that batters against the windows and envelops the marsh in an impenetrable grey haze. Frustrated, Ruth busies herself with work: writing up lecture notes, ordering books from Amazon, even cleaning out her fridge. But she keeps coming back to the torque lying in its freezer bag on the table by the window. Sensing her interest, Flint jumps up and sits heavily on the bag. Ruth pushes him off. She doesn't want Phil to notice the cat hairs. He is apt to be whimsical about the cats, calling them 'Ruth's familiars'. She grits her teeth. He is not going to be whimsical about this find. Phil has always been rather sceptical about Erik the Viking and his views on ritual landscape. For the Iron Age people the henge was already ancient, probably as much of a mystery to them as it is to us. Did they bury this body in the mud to symbolise the beginning of this mystic landscape? Or was the victim ritually killed to appease the water spirits? If Ruth can prove a link between the body and the henge, then the whole area becomes significant. Saltmarsh could become a major archaeological site.

By lunchtime she thinks that the weather is improving slightly. She goes out as far as the gate and the rain is soft and friendly on her face. It is ridiculous really, because the trench will have filled with water and she can do no real work on her own, but she makes up her mind to walk to the site. It's not far, maybe a mile away, and the exercise will do her good. She tells herself this briskly as she puts on the sou'wester and waders she'd bought for a dig in the Outer Hebrides, puts a torch in her pocket and shrugs her rucksack onto her back. She's just going for a look, that's all. A nice brisk walk before it gets dark. Better than sitting at home wondering and eating biscuits.

At first it is quite pleasant. She is walking with her back to the wind and the sou'wester keeps her nice and dry. In her pocket she has the very same ordnance survey map that they used on the henge dig. Looking at it earlier, she saw the henge marked in

yellow, with green stickers where other pieces of prehistoric wood were found. They seemed to form a line radiating out from the henge and Erik thought at the time that they might have been part of a path, or causeway. Could the path be leading to Ruth's bones?

Rather than following the road to the car park, Ruth strikes out west, keeping to a path intended for bird watchers. As long as she sticks to the path she will be fine. The marsh lies on either side of her, huge clumps of reed and mile upon mile of wind-swept grass. The ground looks solid enough but she knows from experience that it is full of hidden pools, treacherous and deep. When the tide comes in, the sea will come halfway up the marsh, covering the ground swiftly and silently. It was here that Peter was marooned all those years ago, stuck between the tidal and the freshwater marshes, lying on his face in the muddy water, clinging to a piece of driftwood while Erik crept towards him across the mudflats shouting words of encouragement in Norwegian.

Ruth plods along the path. It is very narrow here and the mist means that she can only see a few yards in front of her. She doesn't want to be lured onto the marsh. The rain falls steadily and the sky is heavy and grey. Once, she disturbs a flock of snipe, who rise zigzagging crazily into the air, but otherwise she is quite alone. She hums as she walks, thinking of Erik and Peter and of the enchanted summer on the Saltmarsh. She thinks of the druids who came and camped out by the henge. Erik had been on their side, she remembers. After all, he had said, this is what it was built for, not for scientific study in a museum. But the university, which was sponsoring the dig, had wanted the timbers moved. They were being eroded by the tide, they had argued, they needed to be moved for their own safety. 'But they were *meant* to be eroded,' Erik had argued. 'Life and death, ebb and flow, that's what it's all about.'

But Erik had lost and the timbers were removed, slowly and painstakingly, to the university laboratory. Now Ruth feels a stab of regret for the timber circle that had lain buried in the sand for two thousand years. It belongs here, she thought, wading through muddy puddles, hands deep in her pockets. What the Sand gets, the Sand keeps forever.

At last she can see the hide where Nelson ordered Clough to

bag up the litter. She can even see the car park, deserted now of course. The ground is firmer here and she walks quickly despite being out of breath (she really *must* start going to the gym in January). The police tape is still fluttering in the breeze and Ruth, ducking underneath it, thinks of Nelson, his eagerness, his disappointment when the bones did not turn out to be those of Lucy Downey. He was an odd man, she thought, brusque and unfriendly, but it seemed as if he had really cared about that little girl.

As she suspected, the trench is now almost entirely filled with water. This is the major problem with excavating marshy, tidal sites. In archaeology, it is essential to get a 'context', a clear view of where something is discovered. With sites like this, the very ground is changing beneath your feet. Ruth takes out her beaker and starts to scoop away some of the water. She cannot hope to empty the trench but she just wants to see if there is anything else visible in the soil. Phil has promised to send a team from the university to excavate properly but she wants to see it first. This is her discovery.

After about half an hour, maybe more, she thinks she sees something. A dull, bronze-green gleam in the rich, dark soil. Gently she brushes away soil from its edges. It looks like another torque. Trembling, she takes out her original plan of the site and marks in the new find. A second torque could mean the beginnings of a hoard, a ritual depositing of treasure.

It is definitely another torque, battered and scrunched up as if crushed by a huge hand. But, looking closely, Ruth can see that it is intact. She can see both ends, rounded and smooth compared with the plaited quality of the rest of the metal. Ruth is sure it is from the same period, early to middle Iron Age. Is this a votive hoard? One find looks like chance, two starts to look like a ritual.

She sits back on her heels, her arms aching. It is only then that she realises how dark it has become. She looks at her watch. Four o'clock! The walk can only have taken half-an-hour so she has been squatting here in the mud for nearly two hours. She must be getting back. She straightens up, puts the bag containing the torque in her pocket and pulls up her hood. The rain, which had settled into a fine mist, now suddenly gathers in strength, hitting her in the face as she starts the climb back up towards the path. Ruth puts her head down and ploughs onwards; she has never

been stuck on the marsh in the dark and she doesn't mean to start now.

For about twenty minutes she plods on, head down against the driving rain. Then she stops. She should have reached the gravel path by now. It is almost completely dark, with just a faint phosphorescent gleam coming from the marsh itself. Ruth gets out her torch but its shaky light shows her only flat marshland in all directions. Far off, she can hear the sea roaring as it thunders inland. She tries to get out her map but it is blown back in her face. It is too precious to lose so she packs it away again. She can hear the sea but from which direction? She gets out her compass. She is heading too far to the east. Slowly, trying not to panic, she revolves on the spot until she is facing south, then sets out again.

This time she stops because her foot steps into nothingness. Literally one minute she is on dry land and the next she has sunk knee-high into the bog. She almost falls on her face but manages to save herself, rocking backwards until she is sitting on the firm ground. With an effort she pulls her leg from the liquid mud. It comes free with a horrible squelching sound but her wader, thank God, stays on. Panting, she takes a step backwards. Firm Ground. Step forwards. Oozing mud. To the right, more mud. To the left, firmer ground. She starts to edge to the left, her torch held out in front of her.

After a few yards, she falls headlong into a ditch. Putting out her hands to save herself, she encounters icy water. She raises a hand to her lips. Salt. Oh God, she must have wandered right out to the tidal marsh. Scrambling to her feet she wipes mud off her face and checks her compass again. Due east. Has she missed the path altogether? Is she heading straight out to sea? The roaring in her ears is so loud now that she cannot tell if it is the sea or just the wind. Then a wave breaks right over her feet. There is no mistaking it, a freezing, briny-smelling swell of water. She is on the tidal mudflats, possibly at the very spot where Peter called for help all those years ago. But there is no Erik to save her. She will be drowned right here on the desolate marshland with a priceless Iron Age torque in her pocket.

She is sobbing now, her tears mingling with the rain and sea water on her face. Then she hears something so miraculous that she almost discounts it as a mirage. A voice. Calling her. She sees a light, a shaky hand-held light coming towards her. 'Help!' she

shouts frantically, 'Help!'

The light comes nearer and a man's voice shouts. 'Come this way. Towards me.' Almost on all fours, she crawls towards the light and the voice. A figure looms out of the mist, a thick-set figure wearing a reflective jacket. A hand reaches out and grabs hers. 'This way,' says the voice, 'this way.'

Clinging on to the yellow waterproof sleeve as if it were a lifebelt, she stumbles along beside the man. He seems familiar somehow but she can't think about that now. All she can do is follow him as he traces a circuitous path, first left and then right, now into the wind, now away from the wind, through the mudflats. But whatever route he is taking seems a remarkably effective one. Her feet are on firm ground almost all the time, and before too long she can see the blue and white police tape and the car park where a battered Land Rover is waiting.

'Oh my God.' She lets go of the man and leans over to catch her breath.

The man steps back, shining his torch into her face. 'What the hell were you playing at?' he demands.

'I was trying to get home. I got lost. Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along.'

'You'd have drowned, that's what you would have done.' Then his voice changes. 'You're the girl from the university, aren't you?'

Ruth looks at him, taking in close-cropped grey hair, blue eyes, official-looking jacket. It is her neighbour, the warden of the bird sanctuary. She smiles. Despite her feminist principles, she quite likes being called a girl.

'Yes. You're my neighbour, aren't you?'

He holds out a hand. 'David.'

She shakes hands, smiling again at the strangeness of it. A few moments ago she was clinging on to his sleeve, sobbing hysterically. Now they are behaving as if they have just met at a cocktail party.

'I'm Ruth. Thanks again for saving me.'

He shrugs. 'That's OK. Look, we'd better get you home. My car's over there.'

In the Land Rover, a blessed oasis of warmth and safety, Ruth feels almost elated. She isn't dead, she is about to be driven home in comfort and she has the torque in her pocket. She turns to

David, who is coaxing the engine into life.

‘How did you know the way back? It was amazing, the way you twisted and turned across the marsh.’

‘I know this place like the back of my hand,’ says David, putting the car into gear. ‘It’s weird. There are wooden posts sunk into the ground. If you follow them, it leads you on a safe path through the marsh. I don’t know who put them there but, whoever did, they knew the land even better than I do.’

Ruth stares at him. ‘Wooden posts ...’ she whispers.

‘Yes. They’re sunk deep into the ground, sometimes half-submerged, but if you know where they are they’ll lead you through the treacherous ground, right out to sea.’

Right out to sea. Right out to the henge. Ruth touches the freezer bag in her pocket but says nothing. Her mind is working furiously.

‘What were you doing out on a night like this anyway?’ asks David as they drive along the Saltmarsh Road. The windscreen wipers are almost buckling under the weight of water.

‘We found something. Over by the car park. I wanted to take a second look. I know it was stupid.’

‘You found something? Something old? You’re an archaeologist, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. Some Iron Age bones. I think they might be linked to the henge. Do you remember, ten years ago, when we found the henge?’ She dimly remembers David watching the excavations that summer. How terrible that they haven’t spoken since.

‘Yes,’ he says slowly, ‘I remember. That chap with a pony tail, he was in charge wasn’t he? He was a good bloke. I had a lot of time for him.’

‘Yes, he is a good bloke.’ Funnily enough, there is something about David that reminds her of Erik. Perhaps it’s the eyes, used to scanning far horizons.

‘So, will there be all sorts of people here again? Druids and students and idiots with cameras?’

Ruth hesitates. She can tell that David thinks the Saltmarsh should be left to him and the birds. How can she say that she hopes there will be a major excavation, almost certainly involving students and idiots with cameras, if not druids.

‘Not necessarily,’ she says at last. ‘It’s very low key at the moment.’

David grunts. 'The police were here the other day. What were they after?'

Ruth is not sure how much she should say. Eventually she says, 'It was because of the bones, but when they turned out to be prehistoric they lost interest.'

They have reached Ruth's blue gate now. David turns to her and smiles for the first time. He has very white teeth. How old is he she wonders. Forty? Fifty? Like Erik, he has an ageless quality.

'But you,' says David, 'you're more interested now, aren't you?'

Ruth grins. 'Yes I am.'

As she opens her front door, the phone is ringing. She knows, beyond any doubt, that it will be Erik.

'Ruthie!' Erik's singsong voice echoes across the frozen miles from Norway. 'What's all this about a find?'

'Oh Erik,' says Ruth ecstatically, standing dripping onto the rug. 'I think I've found your causeway.'

It is dark but she is used to that. She stretches out a hand to see if she can touch the wall and encounters cold stone. No door. There is a trapdoor in the roof but she never knows when that will open. And sometimes it is worse when it does. No use screaming or crying; she has done this many times before and it never helps. Sometimes, though, she likes to shout just to hear her own voice. It sounds different somehow, like a stranger's voice. Sometimes it's almost company, this other voice. They have long talks, sometimes, whispering in the dark.

'Don't worry.'

'It'll all come right in the end.'

'Darkest before dawn.'

Words she can't even remember hearing, though now they seem lodged in her brain. Who was it who told her once that it was darkest before dawn? She doesn't know. She only knows that the words give her a warm, ticklish feeling, like being wrapped in a blanket. She has an extra blanket when it's cold but even then she shivers so much that in the morning her whole body aches. Sometimes it's warmer and a little light shines through the edges of the trapdoor. Once he opened the window in the roof. Usually it's only open at night when the sky is black, but this time it was bright and blue and it made her eyes hurt. The bars on the window turned into a little yellow ladder. Sometimes she dreams about climbing the ladder and escaping to ... where? She

doesn't know. She thinks of the sun on her face and being in a garden where there are voices and cooking smells and cool water falling. Sometimes she walks through the water and it's like a curtain. A curtain. Where? A beaded curtain that you run through, laughing, and on the other side there's the warm light again and the voices and someone holding you tight, so tight; so tight they will never let you go.

And, other times, she thinks there is nothing there at all, beyond these walls. Only more walls and iron bars and cold, concrete floors.

CHAPTER 4

Ruth leaves her parents' house as soon as she decently can after Christmas. Phil is having a New Year's Eve party and, though in truth she would rather chew her own arm off than attend, she tells her parents that it is her duty to go. 'It would be bad for my career. After all, he is head of department.' They understand this alright. They understand that she might go to a party to further her career. It's enjoying herself they wouldn't understand.

So, on 29 December, Ruth is driving along the M11 to Norfolk. It is mid-morning and the frost has gone so she drives fast and happily, singing along to her new Bruce Springsteen CD, a Christmas present to herself. According to her brother Simon, Ruth has the musical taste of a sixteen-year-old boy. 'A tasteless sixteen-year-old boy.' But Ruth doesn't mind. She loves Bruce and Rod and Bryan. All those ageing rockers with croaky voices and faded jeans and age-defying hair. She loves the way they sing about love and loss and the dark, soulless heart of America, and it all sounds the same; crashing guitar chords against a wall of sound, the lyrics lost in a final, frenzied crescendo.

Singing loudly, she takes the A11 towards Newmarket. It hadn't been such a bad Christmas really. Her parents hadn't nagged her too much about not going to church and not being married. Simon hadn't been too irritating and her nephews were at quite interesting ages, eight and six, old enough to go to the park and play at being Neolithic hunters. The children adored Ruth because she told them stories about cavemen and dinosaurs and never noticed when their faces needed washing. 'You've got quite a gift with kids,' said her sister-in-law Cathy accusingly. 'It seems a shame ...' 'What's a shame?' Ruth had asked, although she knew only too well. 'That you haven't any of your own. Though, I suppose, by now ...'

By now I have resigned myself to spinsterhood and godmotherhood and slowly going mad, knitting clothes for my cats out of my own hair, thinks Ruth, neatly overtaking an overburdened people carrier. She is nearly forty and although it is not impossible that she should still have a child she has noticed people mentioning it less and less. This suits her fine; when she

was with Peter the only thing more annoying than people hinting about possible ‘wedding bells’ was the suggestion that she might be ‘getting broody’. When she bought the cats her mother asked her straight out if they were ‘baby substitutes’. ‘No,’ Ruth had answered, straight-faced. ‘They’re kittens. If I had a baby it would be a cat substitute.’

She reaches the Saltmarsh by mid-afternoon and the winter sun is low over the reed beds. The tide is coming in and the seagulls are calling, high and excited. When Ruth gets out of her car she breathes in the wonderful sea smell, potent and mysterious, and feels glad that she is home. Then she sees the weekenders’ monster car parked outside their cottage and feels a stab of irritation. Don’t say they have come here for New Year. Why can’t they stay in London like everyone else, flocking to Trafalgar Square or having bijou little parties at home? Why do they have to come here to ‘get away from it all’? They’ll probably let off fireworks and scare every bird for miles around. Imagining David’s reaction, she smiles grimly.

Inside her cottage, Flint leaps on her, mewing furiously. Sparky, sitting on the sofa, steadfastly ignores her. Ruth’s friend Shona has been coming in to feed the cats and Ruth finds welcome home flowers on the table as well as milk and white wine in the fridge. God bless Shona, thinks Ruth, putting on the kettle.

Shona, who teaches English at the university, is Ruth’s best friend in Norfolk. Like Peter, she had been a volunteer on the henge dig ten years ago. Fey and Irish, with wild Pre-Raphaelite hair, Shona declared herself in sympathy with the druids and even joined them for an all-night vigil, sitting on the sand chanting until the tide forced them inland and Shona was lured away by the promise of a Guinness in the pub. That was the thing about Shona, she may have her New Age principles but you could nearly always overcome them with the promise of a drink. Shona is in a relationship with a married lecturer and sometimes she comes over to Ruth’s cottage, weeping and flailing her hair around, declaring that she hates men and wants to become a nun or a lesbian or both. Then she will have a glass of wine and brighten up completely, singing along to Bruce Springsteen and telling Ruth that she is a ‘dote’. Shona is one of the best things about the university.

Her answer phone shows four messages. One is a wrong number, one is Phil reminding her about the party, one is her mother asking if she's home yet and one ... one is distinctly surprising.

'Hello ... er ... Ruth. This is Harry Nelson speaking, from the Norfolk Police. Can you ring me? Thank you.'

Harry Nelson. She hasn't spoken to him since the day they found the Iron Age bones. She sent him the results of the carbon 14 dating, confirming that the body was probably female, pre-pubescent, dating from about 650 BC. She heard nothing back and didn't expect to. Once, before Christmas, when she was shopping dispiritedly in Norwich, she saw him striding along, looking discontented and weighed down with carrier bags. With him was a blonde woman, slim in a designer tracksuit, and two sulky-looking teenage daughters. Lurking in Borders, Ruth hid behind a display of novelty calendars and watched them. In this female environment of shopping bags and fairy lights, Nelson looked more inconveniently macho than ever. The woman (his wife surely?) turned to him with a flick of hair and a smile of practised persuasiveness. Nelson said something, looking grumpy, and both girls laughed. They must gang up on him at home, Ruth decided, excluding him from their all-girl chats about boyfriends and mascara. But then Nelson caught up with his wife, whispered something that brought forth a genuine laugh, ruffled his daughter's careful hairstyle and sidestepped neatly away, grinning at her cry of rage. For a moment they looked united; a happy, teasing, slightly stressed family in the middle of their Christmas shopping. Ruth turned back to the calendars. The Simpsons' grinning yellow faces smirked back at her. She hated Christmas anyway.

Why was Harry Nelson ringing her now, at home? What was so important that he had to speak to her this minute? And why is he so arrogant that he can't even leave a phone number? Irritated but intensely curious, Ruth rifles through the phone book to find a number for the Norfolk police. Of course it is the wrong one. 'You want CID,' says the voice at the end of the phone, sounding slightly impressed. Eventually she gets through to a flunky who connects her, somewhat reluctantly, to DCI Nelson.

'Nelson,' barks an impatient voice, sounding more Northern and even less friendly than she remembers.

‘It’s Ruth Galloway from the university. You rang me.’

‘Oh yes. I rang you some days ago.’

‘I’ve been away,’ says Ruth. She’s damned if she’s going to apologise.

‘Something’s come up. Can you come into the station?’

Ruth is nonplussed. Of course, she wants to know what has come up but Nelson’s request sounds more like an order. Also there is something a bit frightening about coming ‘into the station’. It sounds uncomfortably like ‘helping the police with their enquiries’.

‘I’m very busy—’ she begins.

‘I’ll send a car,’ says Nelson. ‘Tomorrow morning alright?’

It is on the tip of Ruth’s tongue to say no, tomorrow is not alright. I’m off to a very important jet-set conference in Hawaii so I’m far too busy to drop everything just because you order me to. Instead she says, ‘I suppose I could spare you an hour or two.’

‘Right,’ says Nelson. Then he adds, ‘Thank you.’ It sounds as if he hasn’t had much practice in saying it.

CHAPTER 5

The police car arrives at Ruth's door promptly at nine. Expecting this (Nelson seems like an early riser to her) she is dressed and ready. As she walks to the car, she sees one of the weekenders (Sara? Sylvie? Susanna?) looking furtively out of the window, so she waves and smiles cheerfully. They probably think she is being arrested. Guilty of living alone and weighing over ten stone.

She is driven into the centre of King's Lynn. The police station is in a detached Victorian house which still looks more like a family home than anything else. The reception desk is obviously in the middle of the sitting room and there should be framed family portraits on the walls rather than posters telling you to lock your car safely and not to exceed the speed limit. Her escort, a taciturn uniformed policeman, ushers her through a secret door beside the desk. She imagines the defeated-looking people waiting in reception wondering who she is and why she deserves this star treatment. They climb a rather beautiful swirling staircase, now marred with institutional carpeting, and enter a door marked CID.

Harry Nelson is sitting at a battered Formica desk surrounded by papers. This room was obviously once part of a bigger one; you can see where the plasterboard partition cuts into the elaborate coving around the ceiling. Now it is an awkward slice of a room, taller than it is wide, with a disproportionately large window, half-covered by a broken white blind. Nelson, though, does not seem a man who bothers much about his surroundings.

He stands up when she enters. 'Ruth. Good of you to come.'

She can't remember telling him to call her by her first name but now it seems too late to do anything about it. She can hardly ask him to go back to Doctor Galloway.

'Coffee?' asks Nelson.

'Yes please. Black.' She knows it will be horrible but somehow it feels rude to refuse. Besides it will give her something to do with her hands.

'Two black coffees, Richards,' Nelson barks at the hovering policemen. Presumably he has the same problem with 'please' as with 'thank you'.

Ruth sits on a battered plastic chair opposite the desk. Nelson sits down too and, for a few minutes, seems just to stare at her, frowning. Ruth begins to feel uncomfortable. Surely he hasn't just asked her here for coffee? Is this silent treatment something he does to intimidate suspects?

The policeman marches back in with the coffees. Ruth thanks him profusely, noticing with a sinking heart the thin liquid and the strange wax film floating on the surface. Nelson waits until the door has shut again before saying, 'You must be wondering why I asked you to come in.'

'Yes,' says Ruth simply, taking a sip of coffee. It tastes even worse than it looks.

Nelson pushes a file towards her. 'There's been another child gone missing,' he says. 'You'll have read about it in the press.'

Ruth stays silent; she doesn't read the papers.

Nelson gives her a sharp look before continuing. He looks tired, she realises. There are dark circles around his eyes and he obviously hasn't shaved that morning. In fact, he looks more like a face on a 'wanted' poster than a policeman.

'There's been a letter,' he says. 'Remember I told you about the letters that were sent during the Lucy Downey case? Well, this looks to be from the same person. At the very least someone's trying to make me think it's from the same person, which may be stranger still.'

'And you think this person may be the murderer?'

Nelson pauses for a long time before replying, frowning darkly into his coffee cup. 'It's dangerous to make assumptions,' he says at last, 'that's what happened with the Ripper case, if you remember. The police were so sure the anonymous letters came from the killer that it skewed the whole investigation and they just turned out to be from some nutter. That may well be the case here. Nothing more likely, in fact.' He pauses again. 'It's just ... there is always the chance that they *could* be from the killer, in which case they could contain vital clues. And I remembered what you said, that day when we found the bones, about ritual and all that. There's a lot of that sort of thing in the letters, so I wondered if you'd take a look. Tell me what you think.'

Whatever Ruth had been expecting, it wasn't this. Gingerly, she takes the file and opens it. A typewritten letter faces her. She picks it up. It seems to have been written on standard printer

paper using a standard computer, but she assumes the police have ways of checking all that. It's only the words that concern her:

Dear Detective Nelson,

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. She lies where the earth meets the sky. Where the roots of the great tree Yggdrasil reach down into the next life. All flesh is grass. Yet in death are we in life. She has become the perfect sacrifice. Blood on stone. Scarlet on white.
In peace.

There is no signature.

'Well?' Nelson is watching her closely.

'Well, the first bit's from the Bible. Ecclesiastes.' Ruth shifts in her chair. She feels slightly queasy. The Bible always does this to her.

'What's all that about a tree?'

'In Norse legend, there's a tree called Yggdrasil. Its roots are supposed to stretch down to hell and up to heaven. There are all sorts of legends attached to it.' As she says this she remembers Erik, that great teller of Norse tales, sitting by the camp fire, his face radiant in the half light, telling them about Odin and Thor, about Asgard, the home of the Gods and Muspelheim, the land of fire.

'The letter says its roots reach *down* into the next life.'

'Yes.' This was the first thing to strike Ruth. She is surprised to find Nelson so perceptive. 'Some people think that prehistoric man may have believed that heaven was below the earth, not above. Have you heard of Seahenge?'

'No.'

'It was found on the coast, near the Saltmarsh, at Holme-Next-the-Sea. A wooden henge, like the one at Saltmarsh, except there was a tree buried in the centre of it. Buried upside down. Its roots upwards, its branches going down into the earth.'

'Do you think this guy,' – he picks up the letter – 'may have heard of it?'

‘Possibly. There was a lot of publicity at the time. Have you thought that it might not be a man?’

‘What?’

‘The letter writer. It might be a woman.’

‘It might, I suppose. There were some handwritten letters the first time. The expert thought the handwriting was a man’s but you never know. The experts aren’t always right. One of the first rules of policing.’

Wondering where this leaves her, Ruth asks, ‘Can you tell me something about the child? The one who’s gone missing.’

He stares at her. ‘It was in the papers. Local and national. Bloody hell, it was even on *Crimewatch*. Where have you been?’

Ruth is abashed. She seldom reads the papers or watches TV, preferring novels and the radio. She relies on the latter for the news, but she’s been away. She realises she knows far more about happenings in the prehistoric world than in this one.

Nelson sighs and rubs his stubble. When he speaks, his voice is harsher than ever. ‘Scarlet Henderson. Four years old. Vanished while playing in her parents’ front garden in Spenwell.’

Spenwell is a tiny village about half a mile from Ruth’s house. It makes the whole thing seem uncomfortably close.

‘Scarlet?’

‘Yes. Scarlet on white. Blood on stone. Quite poetic isn’t it?’

Ruth is silent. She is thinking about Erik’s theories of ritual sacrifice. Wood represents life, stone death. Aloud she asks, ‘How long ago was this?’

‘November.’ Their eyes meet. ‘About a week after we found those old bones of yours. Almost ten years to the day since Lucy Downey vanished.’

‘And you think the cases are connected?’

He shrugs. ‘I’ve got to keep an open mind, but there are similarities, and then this letter arrives.’

‘When?’

‘Two weeks after Scarlet vanished. We’d done everything. Searched the area, drained the river, questioned everyone. Drawn a complete blank. Then this letter came. It got me thinking about the Lucy Downey case.’

‘Hadn’t you been thinking about it already?’ It is an innocent enough enquiry but Nelson looks at her sharply, as if scenting criticism.

‘I thought about it, yes,’ he says, slightly defensively. ‘The similarities were there: similar age child, same time of year, but there were differences too. Lucy Downey was taken from inside her own home. Terrible thing. Actually snatched from her bed. This child was on her own, in the garden ...’

There is a faint edge of censure in his voice that leads Ruth to ask, ‘What about the parents? You said ... it’s sometimes the parents ...’

‘Hippies,’ says Nelson contemptuously, ‘New Agers. Got five children and don’t look after any of ’em properly. Took them two hours to notice that Scarlet was missing. But we don’t think they did it. No signs of abuse. Dad was away at the time and Mum was in a bloody trance or something, communing with the fairies.’

‘Can I see the other letters?’ asks Ruth. ‘The Lucy Downey letters. There might be something there, about Yggdrasil or Norse mythology or something.’

Nelson is obviously expecting this enquiry because he hands over another file which is lying on the desk. Ruth opens it. There are ten or more sheets inside.

‘Twelve,’ says Nelson, reading her mind. ‘The last one was sent only last year.’

‘So he hasn’t given up?’

‘No.’ Nelson shakes his head slowly. ‘He hasn’t given up.’

‘Can I take these home and read them tonight?’

‘You’ll have to sign for them, mind.’ As he roots around on the desk, looking for a form, he surprises her by asking. ‘What about the bones we found. What’s happened to them?’

‘Well, I sent you the report ...’

Nelson grunts. ‘Couldn’t make head nor tail of it.’

‘Well, basically it said it was probably the body of a young girl, between six and ten, pre-pubescent. About two thousand, six hundred years old. We excavated and found three gold torques and some coins.’

‘They had coins in the Iron Age?’

‘Yes, it was the start of coinage actually. We’re going to do another dig in the spring when the weather’s better.’ She hopes Erik will be able to come over for it.

‘Do you think she was murdered?’

Ruth looks at the detective, who is leaning forward across his untidy desk. It seems strange to hear the word ‘murdered’ on his

lips, as if her Iron Age body is suddenly going to form part of his 'enquiries', as if he is planning to bring the perpetrator to justice.

'We don't know,' she admits. 'One strange thing, half her hair was shaved off. We don't know what that means but it may have been part of a ritual killing. There were branches twisted around her arms and legs, willow and hazel, as if she was tied down.'

Nelson smiles, rather grimly. 'Sounds pretty conclusive to me,' he says.

*

As Nelson escorts her out, he leads her through a room full of people, all working intently, crouched over phones or frowning at computer screens. On the wall is what looks like a roughly drawn mind map, full of arrows and scrawling writing. At the centre of it all is a photograph of a little girl with dark, curly hair and laughing eyes.

'Is that her?' Ruth finds herself whispering.

'That's Scarlet Henderson, yes.'

No-one in the room looks up as they pass through. Perhaps they are pretending to work hard because the boss is there, but Ruth doesn't think so somehow. At the door she turns and Scarlet Henderson's smiling face looks back at her.

*

Once home, she pours herself a glass of Shona's wine and puts the file with the letters in front of her. Before she looks at them though, she clicks on her computer and googles Scarlet Henderson. Reference after reference spews onto her screen. Nelson is right, how can she have missed this? 'Heartache of Scarlet's Parents' screams an article from the *Telegraph*. 'Police Baffled in Henderson Case' says *The Times*, rather more soberly. Ruth scrolls down the article: 'Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson of the Norfolk Police admitted yesterday that there are no new leads in the case of missing four-year-old Scarlet Henderson. Sightings in Great Yarmouth of a child answering Scarlet's description are said by police to have been ruled out of the enquiry ...'

Scarlet's face, poignant in black and white, looks up from the edge of the page. Is she dead, this bright-eyed, smiling child?

Ruth doesn't like to think about it but she knows that, sooner or later, she will have to. Somehow she has become involved.

To stave off the moment when she will have to look at the letters, Ruth types 'Lucy Downey' into the search engine. Fewer references this time, Lucy disappeared before the ubiquity of the internet. She is listed, though, on a couple of websites for missing children and there is an article from the *Guardian* headed 'Ten Years On, the Never-ending Nightmare'. 'Alice and Tom Downey,' she reads, 'meet me in their neat Norfolk home, full of pictures of the same, smiling five-year-old. Ten years ago, Lucy was sleeping in her bed in this same house when an intruder scaled the garage wall, opened the window and snatched the child while the parents were still sleeping ...' Jesus. Ruth stops reading. Imagine that. Imagine coming to wake your little girl in the morning and finding she wasn't there. Imagine looking under the bed, searching, with increasing panic, downstairs, in the garden, back in the bedroom. Imagine seeing the open window, the curtains (she imagines them pink featuring Disney princesses) blowing in the breeze. Ruth can imagine all this, the hairs lifting on the back of her neck, but she can't imagine what Alice Downey felt, is still feeling, ten years later. To lose your child, to have her spirited away like something from a fairy tale, surely that must be every mother's nightmare.

But Ruth isn't a mother; she is an archaeologist and it is time she got to work. Nelson needs her professional help and professional is what she must be. Closing down the computer, she opens the file containing the letters. First she puts them in date order, rather surprised to find that Nelson has not already done this, and examines the paper and the ink. Ten of the twelve letters seem to be on the same standard printer paper as the Scarlet Henderson letter. This doesn't necessarily mean anything, she tells herself. Nine out of ten people with printers must use this sort of paper. Similarly the typeface looks very ordinary, Times New Roman she thinks. But two of the letters are handwritten on lined paper, the sort that comes from a refill pad, complete with a narrow red margin and holes for filing. The letters are written with a thin felt-tip, what used to be called a 'handwriting pen' when Ruth was at school. The writing itself is legible but untidy and slopes wildly to the left. A man's writing, the expert said. It occurs to her that she hardly ever sees

handwriting these days; her students all have laptops, her friends send her emails or texts, she even edits papers on-line. The only handwriting she can recognise is her mother's, which usually comes inside inappropriately sentimental cards. 'To a special daughter on her birthday ...'

The handwritten letters come in the middle of the sequence. Ruth puts them back into order and starts to read:

November 1997

Nelson,

You are looking for Lucy but you are looking in the wrong places. Look to the sky, the stars, the crossing places. Look at what is silhouetted against the sky. You will find her where the earth meets the sky.

In peace.

December 1997

Nelson,

Lucy is the perfect sacrifice. Like Isaac, like Jesus, she carries the wood for her own crucifixion. Like Isaac and Jesus she is obedient to the father's will.

I would wish you the compliments of the season, make you a wreath of mistletoe, but, in truth, Christmas is merely a modern addition, grafted onto the great winter solstice. The pagan festival was here first, in the short days and long nights. Perhaps I should wish you greetings for St Lucy's day. If only you have eyes to see.

In peace.

January 1998

Dear Detective Inspector Harry Nelson,

You see, I am calling you by your full name now. I feel we are old friends, you and I. Just because Nelson had only one eye, it doesn't follow that he couldn't see. 'A man may see how the world goes with no eyes.'

In peace.

January 1998

Dear Harry,

‘A little touch of Harry in the night.’ How wise Shakespeare was, a shaman for all time. Perhaps it is the wise men – and women – you should be consulting now.

For you still do not look in the right places, the holy places, the other places. You look only where trees flower and springs flow. Look again Harry. Lucy lies deep below the ground but she will rise again. This I promise you.

In peace.

March 1998

Dear Harry,

Spring returns but not my friend. The trees are in bud and the swallows return. For everything there is a season.

Look where the land lies. Look at the cursuses and the causeways.

Ruth stops and reads the last line again. She is so transfixed by the word ‘cursuses’ that it is a few minutes before she realises that someone is knocking on the door.

Apart from the postman making his surly visits to deliver Amazon parcels, unannounced visitors are almost unheard of. Ruth is irritated to find herself feeling quite nervous as she opens the door.

It is the woman from next door; the weekender who watched her drive off in the police car that morning.

‘Oh ... hello,’ says Ruth.

‘Hi!’ The woman flashes her a brilliant smile. She is older than Ruth, maybe early fifties, but fantastically well preserved: highlighted hair, tanned skin, honed figure in low-slung jeans.

‘I’m Sammy. Sammy from next door. Isn’t it ridiculous that we’ve hardly ever spoken to each other?’

Ruth doesn’t think it is ridiculous at all. She spoke to the weekenders when they first bought the house about three years ago and since then has done her best to ignore them. There used to be children, she remembers, loud teenagers who played music into the early hours and tramped over the Saltmarsh with surfboards and inflatable boats. There are no children in evidence on this visit.

‘Ed and I ... we’re having a little New Year’s party. Just some friends who are coming up from London. Very casual, just kitchen sups. We wondered if you’d like to come.’

Ruth can’t believe her ears. It’s been years since she’s been invited to a New Year’s party and now she has two invitations to refuse. It’s a conspiracy.

‘Thank you very much,’ she says, ‘But my head of department’s having a party and I might have to ...’

‘Oh, I do understand.’ Sammy, like Ruth’s parents, seems to have no difficulty in understanding that Ruth might want to go to a party from motives of duty alone. ‘You work at the university, don’t you?’

‘Yes. I teach archaeology.’

‘Archaeology! Ed would love that. He never misses *Time Team*. I thought you might have changed jobs.’

Ruth looks at her blankly, though she has a good idea what is coming.

Sammy laughs gaily. ‘The police car! This morning.’

‘Oh, that,’ says Ruth. ‘I’m just helping the police with their enquiries.’

And with that, she thinks grimly, Sammy will have to be content.

*

That night, in bed, Ruth finishes the Lucy Downey letters.

She was halfway through the letter dated March 1996, with its surprising mention of cursuses and the causeways. A cursus is a fairly obscure archaeological term meaning a shallow ditch. There is a cursus at Stonehenge, older even than the stones.

... Look at the cursuses and the causeways. We crawl on the surface of the earth but we do not know its ways, or divine its intent.

In peace.

April 1998

Dear Harry,

Happy Easter. I do not think of you as a Christian somehow. You seem to belong to the older ways.

At Easter, Christians believe Christ died on the cross for their sins but did not Odin do this before him, sacrificing himself on the Tree of All Knowledge? Like Nelson.

Odin had only one eye. How many eyes do you have Detective Inspector? A thousand, like Argus?

Lucy is buried deep now. But she will flower again.

In peace.

Now come the two handwritten letters. They are undated but someone (Nelson?) has scribbled the date they were received:

Received 21 June 1998

Dear Harry,

Greetings of the summer solstice be with you. Happy Litha time. Hail to the Sun God.

Beware the water spirits and light bonfires on the beach.

Beware the wicker man.

Now the sun turns southwards and evil spirits walk abroad.

Follow the will o'the wisps, the spirits of the dead children.

Who knows where they will lead you?

In peace.

Received 23 June 1998

Dear Harry,

Compliments of St John's Day. Sankt Hans Aften. Herbs picked on St John's Eve have special healing powers. Did you know that? I have so much to teach you.

You are no nearer to Lucy and that makes me sad. But do not weep for her. I have rescued her and raised her up. I have saved her from a life of the mundane, a life spent worshipping false Gods. I have made her the perfect sacrifice.

Weep rather for yourself and for your children and your children's children.

In peace.

Now the letters revert to typewriting and the tone changes. No longer is there the half affectionate teasing, the assumption that Nelson and the writer are 'old friends' and share a special bond. Now the writer seems angry, resentful.

There is a gap of four months before the next letter and the date is predictable:

31st October 1998

Dear Detective Inspector Nelson,
Now is the time when the dead walk. Graves have yawned and yielded up their dead. Beware the living and the dead. Beware the living dead. We who were living are now dying. You have disappointed me, Detective Inspector. I have shared my wisdom with you and still you are no nearer to me or to Lucy. You are, after all, a man bound to the earth and to The Mundane. I had hoped for better things of you.
Tomorrow is the Feast of All Saints. Will you find St Lucy there in all the holy pantheon? Or is she, too, bound to the earth?
In sadness.

25th November 1998

Dear Detective Inspector Nelson,
It is now a year since Lucy Downey vanished. The world has turned full circle and what have you to show for it? Truly you have feet of clay.
A curse on the man who puts his trust in man, who relies on the things of flesh, whose heart turns from the Lord. He is like dry scrub in the wastelands, if good comes, he has no eyes for it.
In sadness.

December 1998

Dear Detective Inspector Nelson,
I nearly did not write to wish you compliments of the season but then I thought that you would miss me. But, in truth, I am deeply disappointed in you.
A girl, a young girl, an innocent soul, vanishes but you do not read the signs. A seer, a shaman, offers you the hand of friendship and you decline it. Look into your own heart, Detective Inspector. Truly it must be a dark place, full of bitterness and regret.

Yet Lucy is in light. That I promise you.
In sadness.

The last letter is dated January 2007:

Dear Detective Inspector Nelson,
Had you forgotten me? But with each New Year I think of you. Are you any nearer to the right path? Or have your feet strayed into the way of despair and lamentation?
I saw your picture in the paper last week. What sadness and loneliness is etched in those lines! Even though you have betrayed me, still I ache with pity for you.
You have daughters. Do you watch them? Do you keep them close at all times?
I hope so for the night is full of voices and my ways are very dark. Perhaps I will call to you again one day? In peace.

What did Nelson think, wonders Ruth, when he read that open threat to his own children? Her own hair is standing on end and she is nervously checking the curtains for signs of lurking bodies. How did Nelson feel about receiving these letters, over months and years, with their implication that he and the writer are in some way bound together, accomplices, even friends?

Ruth looks at the date on the last letter. Ten months later Scarlet Henderson vanishes. Is this man responsible? Is he even responsible for Lucy Downey? There is nothing concrete in these letters, only a web of allusion, quotation and superstition. She shakes her head, trying to clear it.

She recognises the Bible and Shakespeare, of course, but she wishes she had Shona for some of the other references. She is sure there is some T.S. Eliot in there somewhere. What interests her more are the Norse allusions: Odin, the Tree of all Knowledge, the water spirits. And, even more than that, the signs of some archaeological knowledge. No layman, surely, would use the word 'cursuses'. She lies in bed, rereading, wondering ...

It is a long time before she sleeps that night, and, when she does she dreams of drowned girls, of the water spirits and of the ghost lights leading to the bodies of the dead.

CHAPTER 6

‘So what do you think? Is he a nutter?’

Ruth is once again sitting in Nelson’s shabby office, drinking coffee. Only this time she brought the coffee herself, from Starbucks.

‘Starbucks eh?’ Nelson had said suspiciously.

‘Yes. It’s the closest. I don’t normally go to Starbucks but ...’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh, you know,’ she shrugged, ‘too global, too American.’

‘I’m all for America myself,’ said Nelson, still looking doubtfully at the froth on his cappuccino. ‘We went to Disneyland Florida a few years ago. It was champion.’

Ruth, for whom the idea of Disney World is sheer unexpurgated hell, says nothing.

Now Nelson puts down his Styrofoam cup and asks again, ‘Is he a nutter?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Ruth slowly. ‘I’m not a psychologist.’

Nelson grunts. ‘We had one of those. Talked complete bollocks. Homoerotic this, suppressed that. Complete crap.’

Ruth who had, in fact, thought she noticed a homoerotic subtext to the letters (assuming, of course, that the writer is male), again says nothing. Instead she gets the letters out of her bag.

‘I’ve categorised the references in the letters,’ she says. ‘I thought it was the best way of starting.’

‘A list,’ says Nelson approvingly. ‘I like lists.’

‘So do I.’ She gets out a neatly typed sheet of paper and passes it to Nelson.

Religious

Ecclesiastes

Isaac

Christmas

Christ dying on cross/Easter

St Lucy

St Lucy’s Day (21 December)

St John’s Day (24 June)

All Saints' Day (1 November)

Jeremiah

Literary

Shakespeare:

King Lear: 'A man may see how the world goes with no eyes.'

Henry V: 'A little touch of Harry ...'

Julius Caesar: 'Graves have yawned and yielded up their dead.'

T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*: 'There, where trees flower, and
springs flow, for there is nothing again.'

The Waste Land: 'We, who were living are now dying.'

Norse legend

Odin

The Tree of All Knowledge (the World Tree, Yggdrasil)

Pagan

Summer solstice

Winter solstice

Litha (Anglo-Saxon word for the solstice)

Wicker Man

Sun God

Shamanism

Will o'the wisps

Mistletoe

Greek legend

Argus

Archaeological

Cursuses

Causeways

Nelson reads intently, his brows knitted together. 'It's good, seeing it all spread out like this,' he says at last, 'otherwise you can't tell which is a quote and which is just mumbo jumbo. "We who were living are now dying," for example. I thought that was just more spooky stuff. I never realised it was an actual quote.'

Ruth, who has spent hours trawling through Eliot's *Collected Poems*, feels gratified.

Nelson turns back to the list. 'Lots of biblical stuff,' he says, 'we

spotted that straight off. Psychologist thought he might even be a lay preacher or an ex-priest.'

'Or maybe he just had a religious upbringing,' says Ruth. 'My parents are Born Again Christians. They're always reading the Bible aloud, just for kicks.'

Nelson grunts. 'I was brought up a Catholic,' he says, 'but my parents weren't really into the Bible. It was more the saints, praying to this one or that one, saying Hail Marys. Jesus – a decade of the rosary every bloody day! It seemed to take hours.'

'Are you still a Catholic?' asks Ruth.

'I had the girls baptised Catholic, more to please my mum than anything else, but Michelle's not a Catholic and we never go to church. Don't know if I'd say I was a Catholic or not. A lapsed one maybe.'

'They never let you get away, do they? Even if you don't believe in God, you're still "lapsed". As if you might go back one day.'

'Maybe I will. On my death bed.'

'I won't,' says Ruth fiercely, 'I'm an atheist. After you die, there's nothing.'

'Shame,' says Nelson with a grin, 'you never get to say I told you so.'

Ruth laughs, rather surprised. Perhaps Nelson regrets this foray into levity because he turns back, frowning, to the list.

'This guy,' he says, 'what does *he* believe?'

'Well,' says Ruth, 'there's a strong theme of death and rebirth, the seasons, the cycle of nature. I would say his beliefs were more pagan, though. There's the mention of mistletoe, for instance. The druids considered that mistletoe was sacred. That's where the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe comes from.' She pauses. 'Actually, our Iron Age girl. She had traces of mistletoe in her stomach.'

'In her stomach?'

'Yes, maybe she was forced to eat it before they killed her. As I said, ritual sacrifice was quite common in the Iron Age. You find bodies that have been stabbed, strangled, clubbed to death. One body found in Ireland had its nipples sliced through.'

Nelson winces. 'So does our guy know about all this Iron Age stuff?'

'It's possible. Take this stuff about sacrifice, the wicker man.'

Some people think that Iron Age man made human sacrifices every autumn to ensure that spring came again the next year. They put the victim in a wicker cage and burnt it.'

'I saw the film,' says Nelson, 'Christopher Lee. Great stuff.'

'Well, yes. It was sensationalised, of course, but there's a theme of sacrifice that runs through all religions. Odin was hung on the World Tree to gain all the knowledge of the world. Christ was hung on the cross. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac.'

'What did that mean, "Like Isaac, like Jesus, she carries the wood for her own crucifixion."'

'Well, Isaac carried the wood on which he was to be burnt. There's a clear echo of Christ carrying his cross.'

'Jesus.' There is a silence. Ruth suspects that Nelson is thinking of Lucy Downey, condemned, perhaps to carry the instruments of her own death. She thinks of her Iron Age body. Was she really staked down and left to die?

'Actually,' says Ruth, 'there's one very interesting Bible reference. This one from Jeremiah. "A curse on the man who puts his trust in man."'

'I didn't even realise that was from the Bible.'

'Well, it is. One of the prophets. Anyway, I looked it up and guess how the next bit goes ...' She recites it for him:

A curse on the man who puts his trust in man,
who relies on the things of flesh,
whose heart turns from the Lord.
He is like dry scrub in the wastelands,
if good comes, he has no eyes for it,
he settles in the parched places of the wilderness, *a salt
land, uninhabited.*

Nelson looks up. 'A salt land?'

'Yes.'

'The Saltmarsh,' says Nelson, almost to himself, 'I always wondered about that place ...'

'Actually, I think there are a few things that might point to the Saltmarsh,' says Ruth. She reads from one of the letters, *Look to the sky, the stars, the crossing places. Look at what is silhouetted against the sky. You will find her where the earth meets the sky.* Erik

– an archaeologist I know – he says that prehistoric man may have built structures on flat landscapes like the fens or the marshes because they would stand out so much, be silhouetted against the sky. He thinks that’s one reason why the henge was built on the Saltmarsh.’

‘But other places are flat. Specially in this Godforsaken county.’

‘Yes, but ...’ How can she explain that she thinks the letter writer shares Erik’s views about a ritual landscape, about marshland being the link between life and death. ‘Remember what I said about marshland?’ she says at last. ‘We quite often find votive offerings or occasionally bodies buried there. Maybe this man’ – she gestures to the letters – ‘maybe he knows that too.’

‘You think he’s an archaeologist?’

Ruth hesitates. ‘Not necessarily but there’s this word, cursuses.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Exactly! It’s a very technical word. It means a parallel ditch with banks on the inner sides. They’re often found within early ritual landscape but we don’t know what they were used for. At the Maxley Cursus, for example, they found shamans’ batons.’

‘Shamans’ what?’

‘Pieces of decorated deer antler. They would have been used by the shaman, the holy man.’

‘What for?’

‘We don’t know, maybe as part of some ritual ceremony. Maybe they were like magic wands.’

‘This guy’ – Nelson points to the letters – ‘he talks about a shaman.’

‘Yes, it’s quite a popular idea amongst modern New Age thinkers. A holy man who works with natural magic.’

Nelson looks back at the list. ‘What about causeways? Now I’ve heard *that* word.’

‘Causeways are early pathways, often leading across marsh or water.’ She pauses. ‘Actually, I think I’ve found one at the Saltmarsh, leading to the henge. It’s a sort of hidden path marked out by sunken posts. It’s very exciting.’

Nelson looks as if he will take her word for that. ‘So our man may be a pagan, he may be a New Ager, he may be a religious nutter, he may be an archaeologist.’

‘He may be all four, or maybe he just knows a bit about all of

them. He strikes me as someone who hoards nuggets of knowledge. The bit about the will o'the wisps, for example.'

'Yes, what was all that about?'

'Will o'the wisps are lights, often seen on marshland and often on the night of the summer solstice. They lead travellers onto dangerous ground and so to their deaths.' As she says this, Ruth thinks of the weird phosphorous glow over the marsh on the night that she was lost. Without David, would she have died? 'There are lots of legends about will o'the wisps. In some stories they're named after a wicked blacksmith who sold his soul to the devil in return for a flame from the fires of hell. He roams below the earth trying to find his way to the surface, lighting his way by the flame. Other stories say that they're the souls of murdered children.'

'Murdered children,' says Nelson grimly. 'That's what this is all about.'

*

Ruth arrives home to find the phone ringing. She snatches it up and is rewarded by the voice of her favourite Viking.

'Ruthie! What news on the causeway?'

She tells him that no-one else knows of her discovery.

However, when she visited David to give him a bottle of whisky as a thank-you present, he gave her a map of the Saltmarsh with the posts clearly marked in his own hand.

'Excellent,' purrs Erik. 'Don't let Techno Boy see anything until I get there.' Techno Boy is his nickname for Phil, who is addicted to all kinds of archaeological technology.

'When will that be?'

'That's why I'm ringing. Very good news. I've managed to get a sabbatical for next term.'

'That's wonderful!'

'Yes, I know. Magda's very jealous. It's the long nights, you know, a real killer in the winter. Anyway, I hope to be with you in a week or so.'

'Wonderful!' says Ruth again. 'Where will you stay?'

Erik laughs. 'Don't worry; I won't be after your sofa. I don't fancy sharing it with the cats. I'm sure they would put the evil eye on me. I remember a nice B and B quite near you. I'll book

there.'

'I'll book it for you, if you want,' offers Ruth, wondering why she doesn't mind Erik making jokes about her cats.

'No problem, baby. I've got the internet for that. Techno Boy would be proud of me.'

'I doubt it. Erik?'

'What?'

'There's just a chance you might get a call from someone called Detective Inspector Harry Nelson ...'

Nelson had asked her if there was anyone she remembered hanging around the dig ten years ago, anyone fascinated by archaeology and mythology. Ruth could, in fact, remember one name. A man who called himself Cathbad and who was the leader of the group of druids who wanted to save the henge. After a moment's hesitation, she had offered Nelson this name, which was met with a snort of contempt. Did Ruth have any idea what his real name was? No. Did she know anyone who might know? So Ruth had given him Erik's name. She remembers, many times, seeing Erik deep in conversation with Cathbad, the latter's purple cloak flying out behind him as they stood on the mudflats looking out to sea. Cathbad had been fairly young, she remembers. He would only be in his late thirties or early forties now.

She explains the situation to Erik, telling him about the disappearance of Scarlet Henderson and the earlier case of Lucy Downey.

Erik whistles softly. 'So. You are helping the police with this case?'

'Well, only slightly. There are some letters, you see. They were sent when Lucy Downey vanished and Nelson thinks ... Well, he'll explain if he speaks to you.'

'You sound as if you've got quite friendly with him.' There is an odd note in Erik's voice. Ruth remembers that he doesn't much like the police.

'I'm not friendly with him,' she hurries to defend herself. 'I don't know him very well.' Erik is silent so she goes on, 'He's odd, complicated. He seems very Northern and brash. Thinks archaeology is rubbish and mythology is nonsense and all New Agers should be shot but, I don't know, there's something else too. He's bright, brighter than you think at first. And he's interesting, I suppose.'

‘I look forward to speaking to him,’ says Erik politely. ‘Am I to understand that I am a suspect?’

Ruth laughs. ‘Of course not! It’s just ... he was asking whether I remembered anyone from the henge dig, anyone who was interested in druids. And I thought of Cathbad.’

‘Cathbad.’ Erik takes a deep breath, she can hear it all the way across the North Sea. ‘Cathbad. I haven’t thought of him for years. I wonder what he’s doing now.’

‘What was his real name?’

‘Something Irish, I think. He was into the Celtic stuff too. Malone. Michael Malone.’

‘Could he have been involved?’

‘Cathbad? God, no. He was a real innocent. A simple soul. I think he really had magic powers, you know.’

*

After they have said goodbye and Ruth is bustling around, feeding herself and the cats, she reflects that Erik has a way of bringing you up short with something like that. Mentioning magic in the same quiet authoritative way that he talks about carbon dating or geophysics. Can Erik really believe that Cathbad, alias Michael Malone, has magical powers?

She doesn’t know but, before she goes to bed that night, she looks up Malone in the local phone book.

CHAPTER 7

Ruth did not intend to go to Sammy's New Year's Eve party. In fact, nothing could have been further from her thoughts. Having successfully pleaded a cold as an excuse to Phil, she planned to go to bed early with the new Rebus, a surprisingly thoughtful Christmas present from Simon. Shona had been furious with her. 'Please come, Ruth,' she had wailed over the phone. 'I've got to go because Liam's going but he'll be with his wife and without you I'll just get drunk and fall over ...' But Ruth had stood firm. She thought Shona would probably get drunk anyway and the thought of an evening discussing aromatherapy with Phil's wife while trying to steer an increasingly unsteady Shona away from Liam did not appeal as a way of marking the New Year. She thinks of the Lucy Downey letters. *But with each New Year I think of you.* Briefly she wonders how Nelson is spending the evening.

As she lies in bed with Rebus propped in front of her (why are hardbacks so heavy?) and listens to the steady thump of music coming from next door, she feels oddly restless. She makes herself a hot drink but, downstairs, the lights from Sammy's house seem brighter, more tempting. Like will o'the wisps, she thinks suddenly. She sees Flint's tail disappearing through the cat flap and reflects that even her cat is going out on New Year's Eve. Why was she so pleased to think that she would be on her own? Why is her first reaction to invitations always to think of a way of refusing them? Her mother would say that she is becoming a sad spinster and she is probably right.

Ruth goes back upstairs but the words of the book dance in front of her and she can't lose herself in the wonderfully gothic streets of Edinburgh. Almost without knowing it, she gets up and dresses in black trousers and a black T-shirt. Then, as an afterthought, she adds a red silk shirt given to her years ago by Shona. She collects a bottle of red from her small store of wine and, still almost sleepwalking, she finds herself knocking on her neighbours' front door.

Sammy is thrilled to see her. 'Ruth! How lovely. I didn't think you could come.'

'No. Well, I had a bit of a cold so I thought I'd stay home, then

I heard your music and—'

'I'm delighted to see you. *We're* delighted. Ed! Look who's here!'

Ed, a small, bright-eyed man who seems to be perpetually walking on tiptoe, bounds forward to shake Ruth's hand.

'Well, well, well, our mysterious neighbour. I'm very pleased you've come. I've been wanting to chat to you for ages. I'm a bit of an archaeology buff myself. Never miss *Time Team*.'

Ruth murmurs politely. Like most professional archaeologists she regards *Time Team* as at best simplistic, at worst deeply irritating.

'Come through.' Ed steers her into the house. Even with Ruth wearing her flat shoes, he only comes up to her chin. The weekenders' house is larger than Ruth's because they have added a double-storey extension – she remembers the noise and irritation when it was built, three years ago. Even so, it is on the cosy side for a party. The sitting room feels crowded even though there are actually only about five or six people in it.

'These are our friends Derek and Sue, up from London,' says Ed, bobbing up and down beside Ruth. He really does make her feel very large. 'And this is Nicole and her husband Roger who live in Norwich, and this is, well you must know each other, this is our mutual neighbour David.'

Ruth turns in surprise to see David, the warden of the bird sanctuary, sitting uneasily on the sofa, a pint of beer held out in front of him like a shield.

'Hallo,' says David smiling, 'I was hoping you'd come.'

'Oh ho,' says Ed jovially, 'what have we here? Romance blossoming on the mudflats?'

Ruth can feel herself blushing. Luckily the room is dark. 'David and I only really met a few weeks ago,' she says.

'Aren't we dreadful neighbours?' says Ed, striking himself theatrically on the forehead. 'All these years and we're only just getting to know each other. What'll you have to drink, Ruth? Red? White? Beer? I think there's even some mulled wine left.'

'White would be lovely, thanks.'

Ed prances away and leaves Ruth sitting next to David on the sofa, still holding her bottle of red.

'Oh dear,' she says, 'I meant to give this to Ed. Now it looks as if I'm planning to drink it all myself.'

‘I was worse,’ says David. ‘I brought some sloe gin. It was in a Lucozade bottle. I think they thought it was a bomb.’

Ruth laughs. ‘I love sloe gin. Did you make it yourself?’

‘Yes,’ says David, ‘the sloes are wonderful in autumn. And the blackberries. One year I made blackberry wine.’

‘Was it good?’

‘I think so, but I’m not much of a drinker. And I didn’t really have anyone to offer it to.’

Ruth feels a sudden tug of understanding. She too has weekends when she doesn’t speak to anyone but her cats. This is her choice and, by and large, she doesn’t mind, it’s just that meeting someone else solitary seems odd somehow. Like two lone round-the-world sailors suddenly coming face-to-face at the Cape of Good Hope. They understand each other but, due to the nature of their lives, will probably never become friends.

Ed is back, carrying a huge glass of white wine. Ruth gives him the red and he makes such a fuss of it that she suspects it must be rubbish.

‘So, Ruth.’ Ed stays standing beside her; she thinks he likes the sensation of looking down on someone for a change. ‘Found any buried treasure recently?’

Ruth finds she does not want to tell Ed about the body in the mud or about the torques or even about the henge. She doesn’t know why, she just feels that the secrets belong with the Saltmarsh for just a bit longer. David doesn’t count; he is almost part of the marsh itself.

‘I teach at the university,’ she says at last. ‘We don’t really do many digs. At least the students do a dig every spring but they always find the same things.’

‘Why’s that?’ asks Ed.

‘Because we know what is there,’ explains Ruth. ‘They have to find something, after all. The Americans would ask for their money back if they didn’t.’

‘Americans,’ says David suddenly. ‘Dreadful people. We had some last year, trying to catch a sanderling. Apparently they thought it was wounded.’

‘What’s a sanderling?’ asks Ed.

David looks astonished. ‘It’s a bird. Quite common. They run up and down the beach by the edge of the water, trying to catch sea creatures. These Americans, they thought it was hurt because

it wasn't flying.'

'There must be some interesting birds round here,' says Ed, sounding less than interested himself. He starts bobbing up and down again, looking for someone else to talk to.

But David is transformed. 'Wonderful,' he says, his eyes shining. 'The mudflats are like heaven for them. So nutritious. You see whole flocks stopping by on their migration routes, just to feed here.'

'Like a motorway service station,' says Ruth.

David laughs. 'Exactly! In the winter, the Saltmarsh can be covered with birds, all trying to find something to eat on the mudflats. Sometimes there are as many as two thousand pink-footed geese, for example, coming from Iceland and Greenland and there are lots of native waterfowl too: golden eye, gadwell, goosander, shoveller, pintail. I've even seen a red-backed shrike.'

Ruth feels slightly dazed by all these names but she likes the sound of them, and she likes being with another expert, someone else whose job is their enthusiasm. Ed, meanwhile, has drifted quietly away.

'I recognise snipe,' she offers. 'And I think I've heard a bittern. They've got such a sinister call.'

'Yes, we've a nesting pair on the marsh,' says David. 'Must have been the male you heard. They call in the morning, first thing. It's a kind of hollow boom; echoes for miles.'

They are silent for a moment but Ruth is surprised how comfortable she feels with the silence. She doesn't feel compelled to fill it with a cute anecdote about the cats. Instead, she takes a sip of wine and says, 'About those wooden posts on the marsh ...'

David looks surprised and is about to say something but, just at that moment Sammy bustles up and tells them that there is food in the kitchen.

'Then we've got to get you two mingling. Can't have you sitting here in silence all evening, can we?'

They both get up obediently and follow her to the kitchen.

*

Nelson too is at a party. His is rather more glamorous than Ruth's, and certainly noisier. It is being held in rooms above a wine bar and sparkling wine is flowing like water. Discordant

music blasts from the speakers and evil little canapés are circulating. Nelson, who arrived straight from work, has eaten about twenty and now feels slightly sick. His last selection, a prawn in puff pastry, is floating forlornly in a nearby ice sculpture. He is dying for a cigarette.

‘Alright?’ His wife Michelle drifts by, elegant in a metallic gold dress.

‘No. When can we go home?’

She laughs, pretending this is a joke. ‘It’s a New Year’s Eve party so it’s kind of the idea to stay until midnight.’

‘I’ve got a better idea. Let’s go home and get a takeaway.’

‘I’m enjoying myself.’ She smiles widely to prove this and flicks her long blonde hair over her shoulder. She does look fantastic, he has to admit.

‘And besides’ – her face hardens – ‘how would it look to Tony and Juan?’ Tony and Juan are Michelle’s bosses, joint owners of the hairdressing salon she manages. They are gay, which is fine by Nelson as long as he doesn’t have to go to their parties. He considers this attitude quite enlightened and is hurt when Michelle says he is prejudiced.

‘They won’t notice. The place is packed.’

‘They will notice, and anyway I don’t want to leave. Come on Harry.’ She puts a hand on his arm, running a manicured nail up his sleeve. ‘Relax. Let your hair down.’

He is softening. ‘I haven’t got much hair. I’m the only person here without highlights.’

‘I like your hair,’ she says. ‘It’s very George Clooney.’

‘Grey, you mean?’

‘Distinguished. Come on, let’s get you another drink.’

‘Have they got any beer?’ Nelson asks plaintively. But he allows himself to be led away.

*

Ruth and David are at the conservatory window, watching Ed and Derek trying to light fireworks. The conservatory, another new addition to the house, faces towards King’s Lynn and they can already see other small explosions in the sky as people greet the New Year. Ed, though, is having difficulty. It is drizzling and his safety lighter won’t work. Sammy keeps shouting helpful hints

from the window and people are getting restive. It is ten minutes to midnight.

‘Interesting tradition,’ says David, ‘lighting fireworks at the start of the new year.’

‘Isn’t it meant to symbolise lighting the way for the new year,’ says Ruth.

‘Or setting fire to the old?’ suggests Sue, Derek’s wife.

‘What about a tall, dark man crossing the threshold at midnight,’ says Sammy. ‘We must have that.’

‘Have we got any tall dark men?’ asks Sue with a laugh.

‘Well, Ed’s dark ...’ giggles Sammy disloyally.

‘What about you?’ Sue turns to David who is visibly trying to disappear into the shiny pine floor.

‘I’m going a bit thin on top, I’m afraid,’ he says.

‘Nonsense. You’ll do.’

‘Isn’t he meant to be carrying a lump of coal?’ says Nicole, who hasn’t yet spoken. She is petite and French and makes Ruth feel like an elephant.

‘I’m afraid we’re all oil-fired here,’ says Sammy. ‘But he could carry a pot of Marmite.’

‘Marmite!’ Nicole shudders extravagantly. ‘What a terrible English taste.’

‘Well it’s black, that’s all that matters,’ says Sammy.

Ruth thinks suddenly of the will o’the wisps, and the doomed blacksmith wandering the underworld with his lump of coal from the devil’s furnace. Outside, a firework finally leaps into life. The sky is filled with green and yellow stars. Everyone cheers. In the background, on the television, excitable crowds of C-list celebrities count down alongside Big Ben.

‘Ten, nine, eight ...’

In the garden, Ed’s capering figure looks suddenly demonic, outlined against the red glow of the fireworks.

‘Seven, six, five ...’

Sammy thrusts a Marmite pot into David’s hand. He looks at it helplessly. As he turns to Ruth, he too is lit by technicolour flares. Red, gold, green.

‘Four, three, two, one ...’

‘Happy New Year,’ says David.

‘Happy New Year,’ echoes Ruth.

And, as Big Ben tolls mournfully in the background, the old

year dies.

*

Nelson has sloped out to smoke a cigarette and text his daughters. Tony and Juan, too cool for Big Ben and the C-list celebs, have organised their own countdown with the help of Juan's Rolex. Unfortunately Juan's Rolex is five minutes slow so they have, technically, already missed the New Year. Laura, Nelson's eighteen-year-old, is out with her boyfriend. Rebecca, sixteen, is at a party. He thinks grimly of young lads like he had once been, using the chimes of New Year as a chance for a snog. Or worse. A text message from their old dad might be just the thing to break the mood.

Happy New Year luv, he texts twice, with scrupulous fairness. Then, glancing down the menu, he sees the name after Rebecca's. Ruth Galloway.

He wonders what Ruth is doing tonight. He imagines her at a dinner party with some other lecturers, all being very clever and intellectual, word games over the brandy, that type of thing. Does she have a boyfriend? A partner, she'd probably call it. She never mentions anyone but he thinks Ruth is the sort of person to guard her privacy. Like him. Maybe she has a girlfriend? But she doesn't look like his idea of a lesbian (which veers between shaven head and dungarees and the lipsticked porn-film version). Anyway, she might not dress for men but he doesn't think she dresses for women either. She looks, he searches for the word, *self-sufficient*, as if she doesn't much need other people. Maybe she's spending the evening on her own.

He wonders, for the hundredth time, if he's ever going to solve this case. Earlier in the evening he had heard two women talking about Scarlet Henderson. 'Still haven't found her ... terrible for the parents ... of course the police are doing nothing.' Nelson had had to control a murderous urge to storm over, seize the women by their surgery-enhanced necks and bellow: 'I'm working twenty-four hours a day on the case. I've cancelled all leave for my team. I've followed up every lead. I've looked at that little girl's face until it's imprinted on my eyelids. I dream about her at night. My wife says I'm obsessed. Every morning when I wake up, she's the first thing I think about. I haven't prayed since I was at

school but I've prayed for her. Please God let me find her, please God let her be alive. So don't tell me I'm doing nothing, you emaciated bitches.' But, instead, he had just moved away, looking so thunderous that Michelle accused him of ruining everyone's evening. 'It's just selfish, Harry, can't you see that?'

Nelson sighs. From inside he can hear the sounds of champagne corks popping accompanied by an elderly soprano's rather dodgy high notes as she warbles 'Auld Lang Syne'. He looks down at his mobile phone with its glowing green numbers. On an impulse he texts quickly, **Happy New Year HN**, and presses SEND. Then he walks slowly back to the party.

She watches the square of light in the roof turn green and then gold and then red. There are bangs too and sudden whizzing noises. At first she is frightened and then she thinks she has heard these sounds before. When? How many times? She doesn't know. She thinks, once before, he spoke to her and told her not to worry. It was only ... What? She doesn't remember the word.

Usually she only hears the birds. The first ones come when it's still dark; long, wavy noises that she imagines like streamers wrapping themselves around everything. Party streamers, red, gold and green, like the lights in the sky. Then there are the low sounds, deep down, like a man clearing his throat. Like him, when he coughs in the dark and she doesn't know where he is. The sounds she likes best are the ones very high up, twisting and turning in the sky. She imagines herself flying up to meet them, high up where it's blue. But the window is shut during the day so she never sees the birds themselves.

She looks up at the trapdoor. She wonders if he will come down again. She thinks she hates him more than anyone in the world but, then again, there isn't anyone else in the world. And sometimes he is kind. He gave her the extra blanket when it was cold. He gives her food though sometimes he is angry when she doesn't eat. 'We have to build you up,' he says. She doesn't know why. The words remind her of an old, old story, locked away long ago in that other time, the time she thinks must be a dream. Something about a witch and a house made of sweets. She remembers sweets, little chocolate pebbles that you put on your tongue and they melted into thick sweetness, so sweet that you almost couldn't bear it.

She thinks he gave her chocolate once. She was sick and the stone floor smelt of it and she lay down and her head hurt and he gave her

water to drink. The glass had chattered against her teeth. She's got more teeth now. He took the old ones; she doesn't know why. The new teeth feel crowded and odd in her mouth. She tried to see her reflection once, in a metal tray, but this horrible creature stared back at her. A ghost face, all white with wild black hair and terrible staring eyes. She doesn't want to look again.

CHAPTER 8

‘We’ve found him.’

There is nothing more annoying, thinks Ruth, than someone who thinks they don’t have to introduce themselves on the phone, who assumes that you must recognise their voice because it is so wonderfully individual. But, then again, she *has* recognised his voice. Those flat Northern vowels, the air of suppressed impatience, are unmistakable. Still, just to teach him a lesson, she says, ‘Who is this?’

‘It’s Nelson. Harry Nelson. From the police.’

‘Oh. Who have you found exactly?’

‘Cathbad. Of course, that’s not his real name. He’s called Michael Malone.’

I knew that, Ruth wants to say. Instead she asks, ‘Where did you find him?’

‘He’s still in Norfolk. Lives in a caravan at Blakeney. I’m going to see him now. I wondered if you’d like to come.’

Ruth is silent for a moment. Of course, part of her wants very much to come. She is more involved in this investigation than she likes to admit. She has spent hours rereading the letters, looking for clues, chance words, *anything* that might lead her to their author. She feels oddly close to Lucy and Scarlet and to the unnamed Iron Age girl found on the Saltmarsh. In her mind they are intrinsically linked to each other – and to her. She is also curious about Cathbad and, given that she was the one who gave his name to Nelson, also feels slightly responsible for him. On the other hand, Nelson’s assumption that she would be ready to drop everything at a moment’s notice is rather insulting. She is actually rather busy preparing lecture notes and updating her slides. Term starts next week. But, then again, there is nothing that can’t wait a few hours.

‘Hello? Ruth?’ Nelson is saying impatiently.

‘OK,’ says Ruth, ‘I’ll meet you in half an hour. At the car park in Blakeney. Be careful, though, it floods at high tide.’

Blakeney is famous for its seals. At Blakeney Point, the land juts out into the sea, forming a shingle spit which is a breeding ground for seals. A number of local fishermen offer trips out to watch them, and in summer you can see the little boats shuttling to and fro all day from Blakeney Harbour to the spit, filled with excitable tourists wielding giant cameras. The seals take it all with commendable calm. They lie on the beach in companionable heaps looking, Ruth always thinks, like drunks who have been chucked out of a pub. She is less tolerant and usually tries to avoid Blakeney in the summer but today the car park contains only a few vehicles, one of them Nelson's dirty Mercedes, parked as far from the sea as possible. Ruth pulls up her Renault next to Nelson's car and gets her Wellingtons out of the boot. She has lived in Norfolk long enough to know that it is almost always advisable to wear Wellingtons.

'You're late,' Nelson greets her.

'Actually I'm early. It's only twenty-five minutes since you rang,' she counters.

As she pulls on her boots, Ruth wonders exactly why Nelson has invited her today. It is not as if he will need her archaeological knowledge and, unlike Erik, she barely knows Cathbad. Nelson is a mystery altogether. Coming home late from Sammy's party, she had not been that surprised to see her mobile phone flashing. Calls are always delayed on New Year's Eve and she expected it to be one of her friends, perhaps Shona, ringing from a drunken party. The first message had indeed been from Shona, **Happy New Year. I h8 Liam**. The second had been from Erik but the third, intriguingly, had declared itself 'caller unknown'. Pressing READ Ruth had at first wondered who HN could be. It was not until she had read the fourth message that it had come to her. Harry Nelson. Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson. Ringing to wish her a Happy New Year. What did it all mean?

The fourth message had been from Peter.

'It's over there,' says Nelson, pointing.

Ruth sees a decrepit caravan parked right at the top of the beach. It is surrounded by upturned fishing boats and is partly covered by a tarpaulin. In fact, it almost looks like another boat apart from the fact that it is painted purple and has a lightning rod attached to the roof.

Ruth looks quizzically at Nelson.

Nelson shrugs. 'Perhaps he's afraid of lightning.'

Or he wants to attract it, thinks Ruth.

They plod across the stony beach, Ruth's boots holding up better than Nelson's brogues. Two fishermen sitting on the harbour wall look at them curiously. As they reach the caravan, Nelson raises his hand to knock on the door but it is opened before he can connect. A figure wearing a long purple cloak and carrying a staff stands outlined in the doorway.

Cathbad. Ruth's first thought is that he hasn't changed much in ten years. Then, his hair had been long and dark, sometimes tied back in a ponytail, sometimes hanging loose about his shoulders. Now it is shorter and streaked with grey. He has grown a beard which, strangely, remains jet black, so that it looks rather like a disguise, as if it is attached with elastic around the ears. His eyes are dark too and suspicious now as he watches them. Ruth remembers him as nervous, edgy, always likely to explode in either rage or laughter. Now he seems calmer, more in control. Ruth notices, though, that the hand gripping the staff is white around the knuckles.

'Michael Malone?' Nelson greets him formally.

'Cathbad.'

'Mr Malone, also known as Cathbad, I'm Detective Chief Inspector Nelson from Norfolk Police. Can we come in?' As an afterthought, he adds. 'And this is Doctor Ruth Galloway from North Norfolk University.'

Cathbad turns his dark gaze on Ruth.

'I know you,' he says slowly.

'We met at a dig,' says Ruth, 'on the Saltmarsh, ten years ago.'

'I remember,' says Cathbad slowly. 'You were with a man. A red-headed man.'

To her annoyance Ruth finds herself blushing. She is sure Nelson is looking at her.

'Yes,' she says, 'I was.'

'Can we come in?' asks Nelson again.

Silently, Cathbad stands aside to let them into the caravan.

Inside, the first sensation is of being in a tent. Midnight blue draperies hang from the ceiling and cover every piece of furniture. Ruth can just make out a bunk bed with cupboards under it, a cooker, covered with rust and food stains, a wooden

bench seat and a table, this time covered with billowing red material. The blue drapes give a strangely dreamlike feeling, as do the twenty or so dream-catchers twinkling gently from the ceiling. The air is thick and musty. Ruth sees Nelson sniffing hopefully but she doesn't think it is cannabis. Joss sticks, more likely.

Cathbad gestures them towards the bench before seating himself in a high-backed wizard's chair. First point to him, thinks Ruth.

'Mr Malone,' says Nelson. 'We're investigating a murder and we'd like to ask you a few questions.'

Cathbad looks at them calmly. 'You're very abrupt,' he says, 'are you a Scorpio?'

Nelson ignores him. From his pocket he pulls out a photograph and puts it on the table in front of Cathbad. 'Do you recognise this girl?' he asks.

Ruth looks curiously at the picture. She has never seen a picture of Lucy Downey and is struck by the resemblance to Scarlet Henderson. The same dark, curling hair, the same smiling mouth. Only the clothes are different. Lucy Downey is wearing a grey school uniform. Scarlet, in the picture Ruth saw, had been wearing a fairy dress.

'No,' says Cathbad shortly. 'What's all this about?'

'This little girl vanished ten years ago,' says Nelson, 'when you and your mates were getting all worked up about that henge thing. I wondered if you'd seen her.' Unexpectedly, Cathbad is angry. Ruth remembers his ability to change emotions in a second. Now, his face dark in the blue light, he looks like his younger self.

'That henge thing,' he says in a voice shaking with rage, 'was a holy site, a place dedicated to worship and sacrifice. And Doctor Galloway's *friends* proceeded to destroy it.'

Ruth is rather shocked to find herself under attack. Nelson, though, positively quivers at the words 'worship and sacrifice'.

'We didn't destroy it,' Ruth says, rather lamely. 'It's at the university. In the museum.'

'The museum!' mimics Cathbad savagely. 'A dead place, full of bones and corpses.'

'Mr Malone,' cuts in Nelson. 'Ten years ago, you were ... how old?'

‘I’m forty-two now. Not that I count the years on the temporal plane.’

Nelson ignores this. ‘So, ten years ago you would have been thirty-two.’

‘Full marks for the maths, Detective Chief Inspector.’

‘What were you doing ten years ago, aged thirty-two?’

‘Looking up at the stars, listening to the music of the spheres.’

Nelson leans forward. He doesn’t raise his voice but suddenly Ruth feels the temperature in the caravan drop. She is suddenly aware of an undercurrent of violence in the room. And it isn’t coming from Cathbad.

‘Look,’ says Nelson softly, ‘either you answer my questions civilly or we go down to the station and do it there. And, I promise you, when it gets out that you’ve been questioned in connection with this case, you won’t be looking at the stars. You’ll be looking at a gang of vigilantes trying to burn your bloody caravan down.’

Cathbad looks at Nelson for a long moment, drawing his cloak around him as if for protection. Then he says, in a low monotone, ‘Ten years ago I was living in a commune near Cromer.’

‘And prior to that?’

‘I was a student.’

‘Where?’

‘Manchester.’ Cathbad suddenly looks at Ruth and smiles, rather oddly. ‘Studying archaeology.’

Ruth lets out an involuntary gasp. ‘But that’s where—’

‘Erik Anderssen taught. Yes. That’s where I met him.’

Nelson seems uninterested in this but Ruth’s mind is racing. So Cathbad knew Erik long before the henge dig. Why hadn’t Erik mentioned it? Erik had been her tutor when she did her doctorate at Southampton but she knew that previously he had been a lecturer at Manchester. Why hadn’t Erik told her that he had been Cathbad’s tutor too?

‘So, what did you do, on this commune? Did any of you do any real work?’

‘Depends what you mean by real,’ says Cathbad with a flash of his old spirit. ‘We grew vegetables, we cooked them, we made music, we sang, we made love. And I was a postman,’ he adds, as an afterthought.

‘A *postman*?’

‘Yes. Is that real enough for you? Early starts, it suited me fine. I love the dawn, leaves you with the rest of the day free.’

‘Free to disrupt the henge dig?’

‘Disrupt!’ The fire is definitely back in Cathbad’s eyes. ‘We were trying to save it! Erik understood that. He wasn’t like the rest of those ...’ He pauses for an epithet strong enough. ‘Those ... *civil servants*. He understood that the site was holy, sacred to the place and to the sea. It wasn’t about carbon dating and crap like that. It was about being at one with the natural world.’

Nelson cuts in again. Ruth can tell he stopped listening at about the word ‘holy’. ‘And when the dig finished?’

‘Life went on.’

‘You went on being a postman?’

‘No. I got another job.’

‘Where?’

‘At the university. I still work there.’

Nelson looks at Ruth who stares at him blankly. All these years, Cathbad has been working beside her at the university. Did Erik know?

‘Doing what?’

‘Lab assistant. My first degree was in chemistry.’

‘Did you hear about the disappearance of Lucy Downey?’

‘I think so. There was a lot in the papers, wasn’t there?’

‘And Scarlet Henderson?’

‘Who? Oh, the little girl who went missing recently. I heard about it, yes. Look Inspector ...’ Suddenly his voice changes and he draws himself up in the wizard’s chair. ‘What’s all this about? You’ve got nothing that links me to these girls. This is police harassment.’

‘No,’ says Nelson mildly, ‘just routine enquiries.’

‘I won’t say anything more without a solicitor present.’

Ruth expects Nelson to argue (something along the lines that only guilty men need solicitors) but instead he stands up, hitting his head on a dream-catcher. ‘Thank you for your time, Mr Malone. Just one thing. Can I have a sample of your handwriting?’

‘My handwriting?’

‘Yes. For our enquiries.’

Cathbad looks as if he is about to refuse but then he slowly gets up and goes to a filing cabinet which is sitting incongruously in a

corner of the caravan. He unlocks a drawer and pulls out a sheet of paper. Ruth wonders why a man living in a caravan full of dream-catchers would also have a locked filing cabinet.

Nelson looks down at the writing and, just for a second, his face darkens. Ruth sees his jaw muscles clench and wonders what's coming. But instead Nelson smooths out the paper and says in a bland, social voice, 'Thank you very much, Mr Malone. Good day.'

'Goodbye,' says Ruth weakly. Cathbad ignores her.

Ruth and Nelson scrunch away over the shingle. The fishermen are still sitting on the harbour wall. The tide is coming in, bringing with it a heady, briny smell and a host of seagulls, calling and crying overhead.

'Well?' says Nelson at last, 'what do you think?'

'I can't believe he works at the university.'

'Why not? It's full of weirdos, that place.'

Ruth can't tell if he is joking or not. 'It's just ... if Erik knew, he didn't tell me.'

Nelson looks at her. 'Are you close then, you and this Erik bloke?'

'Yes,' says Ruth, rather defiantly.

'He's coming to England soon, isn't he?'

'Next week.'

'I'll look forward to meeting him.'

Ruth smiles. 'He said the same about you.'

Nelson grunts sceptically. They have almost reached their cars, which are still on dry land although the water is lapping round some unfortunate vehicles parked lower down.

'It'll play havoc with their suspension,' says Nelson.

'What about his writing?' asks Ruth. In reply, Nelson hands her the piece of paper. It seems to be a poem entitled 'In praise of James Agar'.

'Who's James Agar?' she asks.

'Bastard who killed a policeman.'

'Oh.' She begins to see why Cathbad chose this particular piece of paper. She glances down the lines. The handwriting is extravagant, full of swirls and loops. It is nothing like the writing in the Lucy Downey letters.

'It's not the same,' she says.

'Doesn't mean he's off the hook.'

‘Do you suspect him then?’

Nelson pauses, one hand on his car door. ‘I’m not ruling him out,’ he says at last. ‘He’s a slippery character. He was in the area at the time and he knows all about that mystic stuff. He’s clever too, and he’s got something to hide. Why was that cabinet locked? I’m going to come back with a search warrant.’

‘Will you get one?’

‘Probably not. He was right when he said I had nothing on him. That’s why I say he’s clever.’

Not quite knowing why she says it, Ruth volunteers, ‘Erik says he has magic powers.’

This time Nelson laughs out loud. ‘Magic powers! Nothing magic about him that a kick up the arse won’t cure.’ He gets into his car but pauses before putting the key in the ignition. ‘Mind you,’ he says, ‘he did get one thing right. I am a Scorpio.’

CHAPTER 9

As Ruth turns into New Road she sees a familiar red sports car parked in front of her house. Shona often explains that her car is a penis substitute and, like the real thing, is often unreliable. Ruth hasn't seen Shona since before Christmas and wonders what new dramas she will have to report. She quite enjoys Shona's love life – second hand, she wouldn't want to live it herself, just as she wouldn't drive a scarlet Mazda. Fat chance of either, she thinks, as she parks behind Shona's car – number plate: FAB 1.

Shona, huddled up in a sheepskin coat, is standing looking out over the Saltmarsh. Dark clouds are gathering over the sea, which gives the whole place an ominous feel. Shadows race over the mudflats and the seagulls are flying inland, sure sign of a storm to come.

'Jesus, Ruth,' says Shona, 'I don't know how you can live here. This place gives me the creeps.'

'I like it,' says Ruth mildly. 'I like being able to look right out to the horizon, with nothing in the way.'

'No people, no shops, no Italian restaurants.' Shona shudders. 'It wouldn't do for me.'

'No,' agrees Ruth. 'Do you want some lunch?'

In the cottage they are greeted ecstatically by Flint. Ruth goes into the kitchen and arranges cheese, pate and salami on a plate. Shona sits at the table by the window, talking.

'I'm definitely going to end it with Liam. He says he loves me but he's obviously never going to leave Anne. Now she's got to have an operation and he can't do anything to upset her. I bet it's just a tummy tuck, anything to avoid making a decision. It was awful on New Year's Eve. Liam kept shoving me into cupboards and saying he loved me and trying to feel me up, then next minute he was back with his arm round Anne talking about their extension. And Phil kept asking me if I'd got a bloke yet. Wanker. Just because I wouldn't go to bed with him. And Phil's awful wife telling me that I'd got a mauve aura. Bloody cheek, I hate mauve; it clashes with my hair.'

She pauses to eat a piece of bread, shaking out her red-gold hair so that it shimmers in the dim afternoon light. Ruth wonders

what it must be like to be so beautiful. Exhausting, to judge from what Shona says. Yet it must be exciting too – imagine if every man you met wanted to go to bed with you. Briefly, she flicks through a mental card index of the men in her life: Phil, Erik, her students, Ed next door, David, Harry Nelson. She can't really imagine any of them panting with desire for her. The thought is absurd and oddly disturbing—

‘Ruth!’

‘What?’

‘I was asking what you did on New Year's Eve.’

‘Oh, well, I had a cold, like I told you, so I decided to stay home but next door were having a party and the music was so loud that I gave in and went round.’

‘Did you? What was it like?’

‘Pretty boring. My neighbour kept asking annoying questions about archaeology.’

‘Anyone interesting or were they all smug marrieds?’

‘Mostly couples. There was another neighbour, David, the bird warden.’

‘Oh.’ Shona perks up at the thought of an unattached man. Unconsciously she rakes her fingers through her hair so that it falls more seductively across her face. ‘What was he like?’

Ruth considers. ‘OK. Quiet. Interesting, though a bit obsessive about birds.’

‘How old?’

‘My age, I think. Fiftyish.’

‘Ruth! You're not forty yet.’

‘I will be in July.’

‘We must have a party,’ says Shona vaguely, licking her finger to pick up cheese crumbs. ‘And what about this highly mysterious police work you've been doing?’

‘Who told you about that?’

‘Phil.’

‘Oh, well it's not very mysterious really. This policeman asked me to look at some bones he'd found but they weren't modern, they were Iron Age.’

‘Why did he think they might be modern?’

‘He was looking for the body of a girl who disappeared ten years ago.’

Shona whistles. ‘There's been another little girl gone missing

recently, hasn't there?'

Ruth nods. 'Scarlet Henderson.'

'Are you involved in that too?'

Again, Ruth hesitates. She is not sure how much she wants to tell Shona. Shona is always so *interested* in everything, she is sure to make Ruth say more than she wants to. Nelson has told her that the contents of the letters are confidential ('Don't want the press getting hold of it') but, then again, Shona is the literature expert.

'A little. There are some letters ...'

Sure enough, Shona leans forward immediately, intrigued by the mention of the written word.

'Letters?'

'Yes, written after the first disappearance and now after Scarlet Henderson. This policeman, he thinks they might be linked.' Has she said too much?

'What do the letters say?'

'I don't think I can tell you,' says Ruth. She feels uncomfortable under the ultraviolet glare of Shona's interest.

Shona looks at her speculatively, as if wondering how much information she can extract. But then she seems to change her mind, tossing back her hair and looking out of the window where the sky is now a brooding purple colour.

'This policeman, what's his name?'

'Nelson. Harry Nelson.'

Shona swings round to look hard at Ruth. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Oh nothing.' Shona goes back to the window. 'It's just that I think I heard something about him once. Something about police brutality, I think. God, look at that sky! I'd better get home before it tips down.'

*

Ten minutes after Shona has left, the storm breaks. Rain and hail hurl themselves at the windows until Ruth feels as if she is under siege. The wind is roaring in from the sea with a noise like thunder and she feels as if her whole cottage is shaking, tossed to and fro like a ship at sea. She is used to storms, of course, but she still finds them disconcerting. This house has stood for over a

hundred years, she tells herself, it'll take more than a winter storm to blow it away. But the wind howls and wails as if it is trying to disprove her and the windows rattle under the onslaught. Ruth draws the curtains and turns on the lights. She'll do some work; that'll take her mind off the weather.

But instead of clicking onto Lectures 07, Ruth finds her finger hovering over the tempting, multicoloured Google logo. After a few seconds' inward struggle, she gives in and types in the words Harry Nelson. ENTER. A stream of Nelsons floods the screen, including a US chess champion and a professor of physics. Harry Nilsson is there too, the guy who sang 'Without You'. Ruth hums it now, scrolling down the screen. There he is. DI Harry Nelson, decorated for bravery in 1990. And again, Harry Nelson (back row, second left) in a police rugby team. Ruth has another idea and clicks onto Friends Reunited, a rather guilty late-night fix of hers. Yes, here he is. Henry (Harry) Nelson at a Catholic grammar school in Blackpool. What does he say about himself? His contribution is brief in the extreme: 'Married to Michelle, two daughters. Living in Norfolk (God help me).'

Ruth ponders this. No mention of the police. Does Nelson think his old friends in Blackpool will despise him for becoming a policeman? And it is interesting that he refers to his wife by name but not his daughters. Maybe he is scared of paedophiles on the internet. He would, surely, know more than most about the dark side of human nature. Still, it must be significant that his marriage to Michelle is the first thing he mentions, as if it were the achievement of his life. Perhaps it is. Ruth thinks back to that sighting before Christmas. Michelle certainly looked attractive enough, a definite prize for a man who is letting himself go a bit, a man who doesn't look as if he has a gym membership or spends more than five pounds on a haircut. And Michelle looked, Ruth struggles to put her finger on it, like a woman who knows her own worth, as if she knows the value of her good looks and how to use them for her own purposes. She remembers seeing her laughing up at Nelson, her hand on his arm, soothing, cajoling. She looked, in short, like the sort of woman Ruth dislikes intensely.

What else? Well, he doesn't like Norfolk much. Ruth has already gathered as much from his references to 'this Godforsaken county'. Godforsaken. And God gets a mention here

too, even if the police force doesn't. *God help me*. It is meant light-heartedly, Ruth knows, but the fact remains that Nelson has one thing in common with the mysterious letter writer. He too likes to mention God.

Ruth scrolls back and clicks on the first mention, the decoration for bravery. She sees a much younger Nelson, less battered and wary-looking. He is holding a certificate and looking embarrassed. She reads:

PC Harry Nelson was awarded the Police Medal for Bravery in connection with the poll tax riots in Manchester. The riots, which quickly became violent, culminated in the death of a policeman, PC Stephen Naylor. PC Nelson, at great risk to his own life, broke through the lines of protestors to carry away PC Naylor's body. PC Naylor later died of his injuries. A twenty-four-year-old man, James Agar, was charged with the murder.

James Agar. Ruth looks at the name, clicking through her internal search engine. Then it comes to her. Cathbad's poem, 'In praise of James Agar'. No wonder Nelson's face had turned black when he read it. No wonder Cathbad had been so careful to choose this particular example of his handwriting. Manchester. That must have been when Cathbad was a student. Maybe he was involved in the riots. Lots of students were. She remembers similar riots when she was a student in London, watching from a window at University College, sympathising with the cause but too prudent to join in. Cathbad, typically, would have shown no such reserve. And James Agar was convicted. She wonders on whose evidence.

Sure enough, Ruth clicks on 'James Agar' and finds page after page of tributes to James Agar – 'framed by the police for the killing of PC Stephen Naylor'. There had been one key witness at Agar's trial: PC Harry Nelson.

Ruth clicks back onto her lecture notes. The wind continues to howl across the marshes. Flint, his fur soaked flat, dashes in through the cat flap and sits on the sofa looking martyred. Sparky is nowhere to be seen. She is probably hiding somewhere. She hates rain.

Ruth adds a few desultory notes about soil erosion and is just about to make herself a compensatory sandwich (compensating

for what?) when the phone rings. She snatches it up like a lifeline.

‘Ruth! How are you?’

It is Peter.

After they split up Peter made a concerted attempt to stay in touch. He was living and working in London but he used to phone a lot, and once or twice came up to see her. On these occasions they invariably ended up in bed together and this felt so right that Ruth came to the conclusion that it must be wrong. If we’re apart, we must stay apart, she had said, it’s no good carrying on like this. Apart from anything else, it’ll stop either of us finding someone new. Peter had been terribly hurt. But I want to be with you, he had said. Don’t you see, if we can’t stay away from each other, it must mean that we were meant to be together? But Ruth had been adamant and eventually Peter had stormed back to London in a fury, swearing undying love all the way. Six months later he had married someone else.

That had been five years ago. Ruth had heard very little from Peter in that time, a Christmas card, once a copy of an article he had written. She knew that he and his wife, Victoria, had had a baby, a boy called Daniel. He must be about four now. After Daniel’s birth (she sent a teddy), Ruth had heard nothing until the text message on New Year’s Eve. **Happy New Year love Peter.** Nothing more, but just for a second Ruth had felt her heart contract.

‘Peter. Hallo.’

‘Bit of blast from the past, eh?’

‘You could say that, yes.’

A brief silence. Ruth tries to imagine Peter at the other end of the phone. Is he calling from work? From home? She imagines Victoria, whom she has never met, sitting by his side with Daniel on her lap. ‘What’s Daddy doing?’ ‘Shh darling, he’s ringing his ex-girlfriend.’

‘So.’ Very hearty. ‘How’ve you been, Ruth?’

‘I’ve been fine. How about you?’

‘Fine. Working hard.’

Peter teaches history at University College, London, where Ruth did her first degree. She imagines him there: the view of dusty plane trees, of bicycles chained against railings, of London buses, and tourists wandering lost around Gordon Square.

‘Still at UCL?’

‘Yes. What about you?’

‘Still at North Norfolk. Still digging up bones and fighting with Phil.’

Peter laughs. ‘I remember Phil. Is he still keen on his geophysics gadgets?’

‘I think he’s shortly going to mutate into a machine.’

Peter laughs again but this time the laugh ends rather abruptly. ‘Look Ruth. The thing is, I’ve got a sabbatical next term—’

‘You too?’ The words are out before she can stop them.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, it’s just – Erik’s got a sabbatical too. He’s coming over next week.’

‘Erik! The old Viking himself! So you’re still in touch?’

‘Yes.’ Slightly defensively.

‘Well, the thing is ... I’m writing a book on Nelson.’

‘Who?’

A confused pause. ‘Horatio Nelson. Admiral Nelson. You remember, I did my postgraduate research on the Napoleonic Wars.’

‘Oh ... yes.’ The other Nelson in her life has temporarily caused her to forget the most famous Nelson of all. Of course, he was from Norfolk too, there are hundreds of pubs named after him.

‘Well, I’m planning to visit Burnham Thorpe. You know, where he was born. I’m renting a cottage nearby and I thought I could pop over and see you.’

Several things cross Ruth’s mind. You must have been to Burnham Thorpe before, without ‘popping over’ to see me, why is this different? Will your wife be there? Is this only about research? Why ring me after all this time?

Aloud she says, ‘That would be great.’

‘Good.’ Peter sounds relieved. ‘And I’d like to see the Saltmarsh again. God, I remember that summer. Finding the henge in the mud, those hippies who kept putting spells on us, old Erik telling ghost stories around the campfire. Do you remember when I nearly drowned?’

‘Yes.’ Peter is suffering from an attack of nostalgia, she knows the symptoms. She mustn’t join in otherwise she’ll be swept away too, drowning in a quicksand of the past.

Peter sighs. ‘Well, I’ll be in touch. It’ll probably be next week or

the week after. Will you be around?’

‘Yes, I’ll be around.’

‘Great. Bye then.’

‘Bye.’

Ruth replaces the receiver thoughtfully. She doesn’t know why Peter is coming to see her; she only knows that the past seems to be converging on her. First Erik, then Cathbad, now Peter. Before she knows it, she will have gone back in time ten years and will be walking along the beach, hand-in-hand with Peter, her hair six inches longer and her waist four inches thinner. She shakes her head. The past is dead. She, as an archaeologist, knows that better than most. But she knows too that it can be seductive.

Rain is still drumming against the windows. Getting up, she strokes Flint, who is now stretched out on the sofa, eyes shut, pretending she isn’t there. She’d better check that Sparky isn’t outside meowing to be let in – although she has a cat flap, Sparky really prefers having the door opened for her. Ruth opens the door.

The rain flies in her face, blinding her. Spluttering, she wipes her eyes on her sleeve. And then she sees it. Sparky is on the doorstep but she isn’t meowing or making any other sound. She is lying on her back and her throat has been cut.

CHAPTER 10

Nelson is, for once, driving slowly. It is still raining hard, turning the narrow lanes into treacherous gullies, but Nelson isn't usually the sort of driver who worries about weather conditions. No, Nelson is dawdling because he has just been to see Scarlet's parents and feels he needs some time to recover before getting back to the station. He has had to tell the parents, Delilah and Alan, that not only has the investigation made no progress, but the police want to bring sniffer dogs to search the family garden. *Cases like this, it's usually the parents.* That's what he told Ruth and although maybe he had been trying to shock her, in his experience it has often proved true. One of his first cases involved a missing child in Lytham. Hundreds of police hours spent searching, a young mother very eloquent and moving at the press conference and then Nelson, a young PC, making a routine call at the house, had noticed a strange smell in the downstairs loo. He'd called for reinforcements but, before they arrived, had already found the tiny corpse, stuffed into the cistern. 'She gets on my nerves,' said the mother, apparently unrepentant. 'She's a little devil'. The present tense. It still gets to him. He'd been commended for his work on that case but he remembers weeks, months, of sleepless nights afterwards, retching as he remembered the smell, the sight of the water-bloated body.

He's ruling nothing out but he doesn't really suspect Scarlet's parents. Alan was away anyway and Delilah – Delilah is a fading flower child in bare feet and fringed skirts. She irritates the hell out of him but he can't really imagine her as a killer. Never assume, he tells himself. 'Never assume', his first boss, Derek Fielding, used to say, laboriously. 'It makes an ass out of you and me. Get it?' He'd got it, but he wasn't going to give Fielding the satisfaction of laughing; probably why it took so long for the old bastard to promote him, despite the commendation. But the point is a good one. Never make assumptions about people or circumstances. Delilah Henderson could have killed her daughter. She was in the right location and probably had the means to hand. It had taken her three hours to report Scarlet missing. 'I thought they were just playing hide and seek,' she had sobbed.

Nelson disapproves (what sort of mother would not notice, for three hours, that her four-year-old was missing?) but, on balance, he puts it down to the sort of lackadaisical parenting of people like the Hendersons. And she had been distraught, God knows, when she finally realised that Scarlet had gone. She was still distraught, weeping today and clutching an old photo of Scarlet, heart-breakingly happy astride a pink bike with stabilisers. Delilah had hardly taken in the news about the garden, had just clutched at Nelson, begging him to find her baby. Nelson slows down almost to walking pace as the windscreen wipers battle against the onslaught of water. Sometimes he hates his job. Christ, he could do with a cigarette but it's only January, a bit early to break his New Year resolution.

When his phone rings he almost doesn't answer; not for safety reasons – Nelson thinks hands-free phones are for wimps – but because he just can't be bothered with anything else today. When he does press RECEIVE an almost inhuman sound greets him, a sort of sobbing wail. Nelson squints at the caller identification. *Ruth Galloway*. Jesus.

'Ruth? What is it?'

'She's dead,' wails Ruth.

Now Nelson does stop the car, almost skidding into a water-logged ditch.

'Who's dead?'

'Sparky.' Long, gulping pause. 'My cat.'

Nelson counts to ten. 'Are you ringing me up to tell me about a dead cat?'

'Someone cut her throat.'

'What?'

'Someone cut her throat and left her on my doorstep.'

'I'll be right over.'

Nelson turns his car, with maximum tyre skidding, and heads back towards the Saltmarsh. Ruth's dead cat could be a message from the abductor or the letter writer or both. It seems just the sort of warped thing the letter writer would do. Never assume, he tells himself, overtaking a lorry, half-blinded by spray. But cutting an animal's throat, that is definitely sick. Might be able to get some DNA though. He will have to be sensitive ('sensitive' he repeats to himself – the word has a wet, *Guardian*-reader sound that he distrusts), Ruth seems very upset. Funny, he wouldn't

have thought her the sort of woman to have pets.

It is pitch black by the time he reaches the Saltmarsh, and though the rain has stopped it is still blowing a gale. The car door is almost ripped out of his hand and, as he walks up the path, he can feel the full force of the wind in the small of his back, pushing him forwards. Jesus, what a place to live. Nelson's home is a modern, four-bedroomed house outside King's Lynn; it is all very civilised, with speed bumps and security lights and double garages. You'd hardly know you were in Norfolk at all. Ruth's cottage seems little better than a hovel and it's so isolated, stuck out here on the edge of nowhere with only the twitchers for company. Why on earth does she live here? She must earn a fair wage at the university, surely?

Ruth opens the door immediately as if she were waiting for him.

'Thanks for coming,' she sniffs.

The door opens straight into a sitting room which, to Nelson's eyes, looks a complete mess. There are books and papers everywhere, a half-drunk cup of coffee sits on the table, along with the remains of a meal, crumbs and olive stones. But then he stops noticing anything because, on the sofa, lies what must be the mutilated corpse of a small cat. Ruth has covered the body with a pink, fluffy blanket which, for some reason, makes his throat close up for a second. He pulls back the blanket.

'Have you touched it? The body?'

'She. She's a girl.'

'Have you touched her?' repeats Nelson patiently.

'Only to put her on the sofa and I did ... stroke her a bit.' Ruth turns away.

Nelson reaches over as if to pat her shoulder but Ruth moves away, blowing her nose. When she turns back, her face is quite composed.

'Do you think it was him?' she asks. 'The murderer?'

'We haven't got a murder yet,' says Nelson cautiously.

Ruth shrugs this aside. 'Who would do something like this?'

'Someone pretty sick, that's for sure,' says Nelson, bending over Sparky's body. Then he straightens up. 'Does anyone know you're involved in this investigation?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

‘Phil, my boss, knows,’ says Ruth slowly, ‘and maybe some other people at the university. My next-door neighbour saw me leaving in a police car that time.’

Nelson turns away from Sparky then, almost as an afterthought, he stoops and covers the little body again with the pink blanket. Then he touches Ruth’s arm and says in a surprisingly gentle voice, ‘Let’s sit down.’

Ruth sits in a sagging armchair. She looks away from him, out towards the curtained window. The wind is still roaring outside, making the panes rattle. Nelson perches on the edge of the sofa.

‘Ruth,’ says Nelson, ‘we know there’s a dangerous man out there. He may well have murdered two girls and he may be the person who did this to your cat. In any event, you’ve got to be careful. Someone, for whatever reason, is trying to frighten you and I think it’s safe to assume that it has something to do with this case.’

Still looking past him, Ruth asks, ‘Do you need to take her, Sparky, away?’

‘Yes,’ says Nelson, trying to be honest and yet not too harsh, ‘we need to test for fingerprints and DNA.’

‘So really,’ says Ruth in a high, hard voice, ‘this is a bit of a breakthrough.’

‘Ruth,’ says Nelson, ‘look at me.’ She does so. Her face is swollen with crying.

‘I’m sorry about your cat. About Sparky. I had a German Shepherd once called Max. I thought the world of that dog. My wife used to say she felt quite jealous sometimes. When he was run over, I was beside myself, wanted to charge the driver with dangerous driving though it wasn’t his fault really. But this is a possible murder investigation and I’m afraid your cat is a valuable clue. You want to find out what has happened to Scarlet, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ says Ruth, ‘of course I do.’

‘I promise you, Ruth, that, when the lab has finished, I’ll bring Sparky back and help you bury her. I’ll even light a candle in church. Deal?’

Ruth manages a watery smile. ‘Deal.’

Nelson picks up Sparky’s body, covering it carefully with the blanket. As he moves towards the door, he turns. ‘And Ruth? Make sure you lock all your doors tonight.’

When he has gone, Ruth sits on the sofa, at the opposite end to the place where there is a faint bloodstain on the faded chintz. She looks at the remains of her meal with Shona and wonders, dully, how long ago it was that they sat at this table talking about men. It seems like days but it was in fact only a few hours ago. Since then, she has found out that Nelson has a secret in his past, spoken to her ex-boyfriend and seen her beloved cat brutally murdered. She laughs, slightly hysterically. What else will the night bring? Her mother coming out as a lesbian? David the bird warden proposing marriage? She heads for the kitchen, hell-bent on finding some wine. Flint, who has been watching from a distance, comes up and rubs against her legs. She picks him up, weeping into his dusty orange fur. 'Oh Flint,' she says, 'what will we do without her?' Flint purrs hopefully. Ruth has forgotten to feed him.

Splashing Pinot Grigio into a glass, Ruth looks across to the table by the window where her laptop is still open. She presses a key and her lecture notes appear. She clicks back through her history until she is back on the page of Nelsons: the US chess champion, the professor of physics, Harry Nilsson and Henry (Harry) Nelson of the Norfolk police. He had tried to be kind about Sparky, she recognises dimly. Part of him must have been excited about the possible clue but he had tried to acknowledge her feelings. He probably despises her for getting so upset about a cat but she doesn't care. Sparky was her pet, her companion, her friend – yes, her friend, she repeats defiantly to herself. She thinks of the little black cat, so sweet, so self-contained, and the tears run down her face. Who would want to kill Sparky?

And, for the first time, Nelson's final words sink in. *Make sure you lock all your doors tonight.* The person who killed Sparky could have killed Scarlet and Lucy too. The murderer could have been on Ruth's doorstep. He could have been listening outside her window, knife sharpened. He killed Sparky. Her entire body goes cold as she realises that the dead cat was a message addressed directly to her. *Next time it could be you.*

Then she hears it. A sound outside her window. A pause, a muffled cough and then, unmistakably, footsteps, coming closer and closer. She listens, her heart thumping with such huge,

irregular beats that she wonders if she is going to have a coronary, right there on the spot. The knock on the door makes her cry out with fear. It has come. The creature from the night. The beast. The terror. She thinks of *The Monkey's Paw* and the unnamed horror that waits at the door. She is shaking so much that she drops her wine glass. The knock again. A terrible, doom-laden sound, echoing through the tiny house. What is she going to do? Should she ring Nelson? Her phone is across the room, by the sofa, and the idea of moving suddenly seems impossible. Is this it? Is she going to die, here in her cottage with the wind howling outside?

‘Ruth!’ shouts a voice. ‘Are you in there?’

Oh thanks be to the God she doesn’t believe in. It is Erik.

Half-laughing, half-crying, Ruth dives to open the door. Erik Anderssen, dressed in a black raincoat and carrying a bottle of whisky, stands smiling in the doorway.

‘Hello Ruthie,’ he says, ‘fancy a nightcap?’

CHAPTER 11

‘Drowned landscapes,’ says Erik, his singsong voice echoing across the wind-flattened grass, ‘have a peculiar magic of their own. Think of Dunwich, the city swallowed by the sea, the church bells ringing underwater. Think of the drowned forest on this very beach, the trees buried beneath our feet. There is something deep within us which fears what is buried, what we cannot see.’

Ruth and Erik are walking along the beach, their feet crunching on the hundreds of razor clam shells brought in by the tide. Yesterday’s rain has given way to a beautiful winter’s day, cold and bright. The horrors of last night seem far away. It seems impossible that Sparky is dead and that Ruth herself could be in danger. And yet, thinks Ruth, trudging along beside Erik, it is true and it did happen.

Last night she had flung herself into Erik’s arms, almost incoherent with crying. He had been very kind, she remembers, had sat her down and made her coffee with whisky in it. She had told him about Sparky and he had said that, when they got the body back, they should give her a Viking funeral, a burning pyre drifting out to sea. Ruth, who wanted to bury Sparky in her garden, under the apple tree, had said nothing but had been aware that Erik was paying Sparky a huge compliment, considering her a soul worthy of such an honour. She remembers her mother telling her that animals don’t have souls. Another black mark against God.

Ruth hadn’t wanted to be alone last night and so Erik had slept on the sofa, folding up his long limbs under Ruth’s sleeping bag and not complaining when Flint woke him up at five, bringing in a dead mouse. He has been a true friend, thinks Ruth. Despite everything, it is wonderful to see him again, to be striding over the Saltmarsh with him once more.

After breakfast, Erik suggested going to look at the henge site and Ruth had agreed readily. She feels the need to be out of doors, away from the house and the dark corners where she expects, every second, to see Sparky’s little face appear. No, it is better to be in the open, to be walking along the wide expanse of

beach, under the high, blue sky. Mind you, she had forgotten how far it was when the tide is out. The sand stretches for miles, glittering with secret inlets, the occasional piece of driftwood black against the horizon. It looks vast and completely featureless but Erik seems to know exactly where he is going. He strides ahead, his eyes on the horizon. Ruth, wearing her trusty Wellingtons, plods along behind him.

Last night's wind has blown the sand into odd shapes and ridges. Nearer the sea it is flatter, striped with empty oyster shells and dead crabs. Little streams run across the sand to join the sea and, occasionally, there are larger expanses of water, reflecting the blue of the sky. Ruth splashes her way through one of these pools, remembering the summer of the henge dig and the way the sand had felt under her bare feet. She can almost feel the sting of the water and the exquisite pain of walking on the clam shells. At the end of the day, her feet had been a mass of tiny cuts.

'Do you still think we should have left the henge where it was?' she asks.

Erik raises his face to the sun, shutting his eyes. 'Yes,' he says. 'It belonged here. It marked a boundary. We should have respected that.'

'Boundaries were important to prehistoric people, weren't they?'

'Yes indeed.' Erik steps delicately over a fast-flowing stream; he isn't wearing Wellingtons. 'Which is why they marked them with burial mounds, religious shrines, offerings to the ancestors.'

'Do you think that my Iron Age body marks a boundary?' Over breakfast, Ruth had told him more about her find, about the girl with her head shaved and branches twisted around her arms and legs, about the torques and the coins and the tantalising location of the body.

Erik hesitates. He uses his professional voice; measured, calm. 'Yes, I do,' he says at last. 'Boundaries in the ancient landscape were sometimes marked by isolated burials. Think of the bodies at Jutland, for example.'

Ruth thinks of the Jutland discoveries: oak coffins found in water, containing Bronze Age bodies. One had been that of a young woman and what Ruth remembers chiefly were her clothes, a surprisingly trendy outfit of braided miniskirt and crop top.

‘What does gadget boy think?’ asks Erik.

‘Oh, he thinks it’s all chance. No link between the Iron Age body and the henge.’

Erik snorts. ‘How that boy ever became an archaeologist! Doesn’t he understand that if the area was sacred to the Neolithic and Bronze Age people it was sacred to the Iron Age people? That the landscape *itself* is important. This is a liminal zone, between land and water, of course it’s special.’

‘It isn’t that special to us though.’

‘Isn’t it? It’s National Trust land, a nature reserve. Isn’t that our way of saying that it is sacred?’

Ruth thinks of the National Trust, sensible women in quilted coats selling souvenirs at castle gates. It isn’t her idea of sacred. Then she thinks of David and the way he spoke about the migrating birds. He is someone, she realises, who does think that the place is special.

Erik stops abruptly. He is looking at the sand, which has suddenly become dark and silty. He traces a line with his smart shoe. Underneath, the sand is quite startlingly blue. ‘Burnt matter,’ he says, ‘the roots of ancient trees. We’re getting near.’

Looking back, Ruth sees a clump of trees to the left and the spire of a church away in the distance. She remembers the view perfectly; they are very near the henge circle. But the sand, grey in the winter sun, gives nothing away. *What the Sand gets, the Sand keeps forever.*

Ruth remembers how the henge had looked that summer evening ten years ago, the ring of gnarled wooden posts sinister and otherworldly as if it had risen out of the sea. She remembers Erik kneeling before the posts in an attitude almost of prayer. She remembers, when she first entered the circle, a shiver running through her whole body.

‘It’s here,’ says Erik.

There is nothing to see, just a slightly raised circle, darker than the surrounding sand, but Erik acts as if he has entered a church. He stands completely still, his eyes closed and then touches the ground, as if for luck.

‘Sacred ground,’ he says.

‘That’s what Cathbad would say.’

‘Cathbad! Have you seen him?’

‘Yes ... Erik?’

‘What?’

‘Why didn’t you tell me that you knew Cathbad quite well, that he’d been a student of yours?’

Erik is silent for a moment, looking at her. She can’t read his cool, blue stare. Guilt? Amusement? Anger?

‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course it matters!’ Ruth explodes. ‘He’s a suspect in a murder investigation.’

‘Is he?’

Ruth hesitates. She knows that Nelson suspects and distrusts Cathbad but is that enough to make him a suspect? Probably. Aloud she says, ‘I don’t know. The police think he’s hiding something.’

‘The police! What do they know? Hoi polloi. Barbarians. Do you remember when they removed the protesters from the site? The unnecessary violence they used?’

‘Yes.’ The police had been heavy-handed when they removed the protesters. Erik and the other archaeologists had been distressed. They had lodged a complaint, which the police had ignored.

‘Did you put Cathbad up to it?’ asks Ruth. ‘The protest?’

Erik smiles. ‘No, the local pagans were up in arms already. There are a lot of pagans in Norfolk, you know. Let’s just say that I encouraged him a bit.’

‘Did you get him the job at the university too?’

‘I gave him a reference.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me he was working there?’

‘You didn’t ask.’

Ruth turns away, stomping her way over the wet sand. Erik catches her up, puts his arm round her.

‘Don’t be angry Ruth. Didn’t I always tell you, it’s the questions that matter, not the answers?’

Ruth looks at Erik’s familiar, weather-beaten face. He has grown older, his hair is whiter and there are more lines around his eyes, but he is still the same. He is smiling, his blue eyes sparkling. Reluctantly, Ruth smiles back.

‘Come on,’ says Erik, ‘let’s see if we can find that causeway of yours.’

They set off, walking inland across the dunes. A couple of waders are feeding on the mudflats. Ruth thinks of David’s

description of the Saltmarsh as nature's service station. The birds look up as they pass and then continue their frenzied digging. In the distance, a heron watches them, standing meditatively on one leg.

Ruth has David's map, showing the buried posts. Silently she unfurls it and hands it to Erik. He makes a hissing noise of satisfaction, 'So ... Now we have it.' He examines the map for a long time in silence. Ruth watches him with admiration. No-one is better at reading a map or a landscape than Erik. For him, hills and streams and villages are signposts pointing directly to the past. She remembers him saying to her when she first started his postgraduate course, 'If you wanted to make a map of your sitting room for archaeologists of the future, what would be the most important thing?'

'Er ... making sure I have a full inventory of objects.'

He had laughed. 'No, no. Inventories are all very well in their place but they do not tell us how people *lived*, what was important to them, what they worshipped. No, the most important thing would be the *direction*. The way your chairs were facing. That would show archaeologists of the future that the most important object in the twenty-first century home was the large grey rectangle in the corner.'

Now Erik looks up from the map, sniffs the air and smiles. 'This way, I think.' They set off at a brisk walk. The wind is behind them now, blowing the coarse grass flat against the ground. They pass the tidal reed beds, the shallow water dark and mysterious. Above them a bird calls, hoarse and angry.

'Here.' Erik stops and bends down. Ruth squats beside him. There, half-buried in the peaty ground between the reeds and the mudflats, is a post. It extends about ten centimetres above the soil.

'Bog oak,' says Erik. Ruth looks more closely. The wood is dark, almost black, its surface dotted with little holes, like woodworm.

'Molluscs,' says Erik laconically, 'they eat away at the wood.'

'How old is it?' asks Ruth.

'Don't know for sure. But it looks old.'

'As old as the henge?'

'Possibly later.'

Ruth reaches out to touch the post. It feels soft, like black toffee. She has to resist the temptation to gouge in her fingernail.

‘Come on,’ says Erik. ‘Let’s find the next one.’

The next post is about two metres away. This one is harder to see, almost submerged by water. Erik paces between the posts.

‘Incredible. The land between the two is completely dry, although it’s marshland on either side. It must be a shingle spit, incredible that it hasn’t moved over the years.’

Ruth can sense his excitement. ‘So it could be a pathway through the marsh?’

‘Yes, a crossing place. It was as important as marking a boundary, marking a crossing place over sacred ground. One step the wrong way and you’re dead, straight to hell. Keep on the path and it will lead you to heaven.’

He is smiling but Ruth shivers, remembering the letters. *Look to the sky, the stars, the crossing places. Look at what is silhouetted against the sky. You will find her where the earth meets the sky.* Did the letter writer know about the pathway? He spoke about causeways and cursuses. Had he brought Lucy here, to this desolate landscape?

They find a total of twelve posts, leading them back almost to the car park and the place where Ruth found the Iron Age body. Erik takes pictures and makes notes. He seems completely absorbed. Ruth finds herself feeling restless, abstracted. With Nelson, she had been the expert. Now she feels relegated to the position of student.

‘How will you get the wood dated?’ she asks.

‘I’ll ask Bob Bullmore.’ Bob is a member of Ruth’s department, an experienced forensic anthropologist, an expert on the decomposition of flora and fauna. Ruth likes Bob; involving him is a good idea but, again, she has the sensation of being sidelined. This was my discovery, she wants to yell, you wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.

Aloud she says, ‘Shall we tell Phil?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Bob might tell him.’

‘Not if I ask him not to.’

‘Do you think we have found a link between my Iron Age body and the henge?’

Erik looks at her quizzically. ‘*Your* Iron Age body?’

‘I found it,’ says Ruth defiantly.

‘We own nothing in this life,’ says Erik.

‘You sound like Cathbad.’

Erik looks at her for a minute, consideringly, like a lecturer assessing a new student. Then he says, ‘Come and meet him.’

‘Who?’

‘Cathbad. Come and meet him properly.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes. I thought I’d look him up.’

Ruth hesitates. Part of her, the amateur detective part, wants to see Cathbad again, to assess him without Nelson’s sceptical presence clouding her judgement. But she is still slightly angry with Erik for not telling her that he had been Cathbad’s tutor. She considers, stuck in a liminal zone of her own between curiosity and resentment.

As she is thinking, watched quizzically by Erik, her phone rings, the noise sounding shockingly twenty-first century.

‘Excuse me.’ Ruth turns away.

‘Ruth. It’s Nelson.’

‘Oh ... hello.’

‘Are you busy? Can you come to Spenwell? Now.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m at Scarlet Henderson’s house. We’ve found some human bones in the garden.’

CHAPTER 12

Spewell is a tiny village, hardly worthy of the name. One street of houses, a phone box and a shop that is only open for two hours in the afternoon. Scarlet's family live in a big modern bungalow built of ugly brown brick slightly redeemed by ivy. Ruth parks behind Nelson's Mercedes and two police vans. The police presence has not gone unnoticed in the small community. A group of children watch, wide-eyed, from the other side of the road, and up and down the street faces appear in windows. Their expressions are hard to read: curious, frightened, gleeful.

As Ruth approaches, Nelson appears around the side of the house. The front garden has been reduced to mud by police boots. Someone has put down planks, presumably for a wheelbarrow.

'Ruth,' Nelson greets her, 'how are you this morning?'

Ruth feels slightly embarrassed. Today she is the professional, the expert once more, she doesn't want to be reminded that last night she was sobbing over a dead cat.

'Better,' she says. 'Erik ... you know, my ex-tutor, he came round after you left.'

Nelson looks at her slightly quizzically. But all he says is, 'Good.'

'Where are the bones?' asks Ruth. She wants to bring the conversation back to business.

'Round the back. The dogs found the place.'

The back garden is long and untidy, littered with old sofas, broken bicycles and a half-constructed climbing frame built, it appears, out of reclaimed timber. The scene-of-crime officers, clad in white jumpsuits, are clustered round a large hole. The sniffer dogs are straining at their leads, tails wagging madly. With a shock, Ruth realises that the Hendersons are here too. Scarlet's father and mother, standing silently by the back door. The mother is youngish, pale and pretty with long dark hair and a waifish look. She is wearing a purple velvet skirt and is barefoot, despite the cold. The father is older and has a slightly rat-like face, thin with watery eyes. In the garden three of their children are playing on the half-finished climbing frame, apparently unconcerned.

‘This is Doctor Ruth Galloway,’ says Nelson to one of the jump-suited men. ‘She’s an expert on buried bones.’ Like a dog, thinks Ruth.

Ruth looks at the hole, which seems to run along the dividing line between the Hendersons’ garden and the garden next door. Nearer the house, there is a timber fence but, here, at the end of the garden, there is only flint and rubble. A boundary, thinks Ruth. She hears Erik’s voice in her head. *It marked a boundary. We should have respected that.*

‘Did there used to be a wall here?’ she asks. She addressed the nearest white suit but Scarlet’s father must have heard because he steps forward.

‘There used to be an old flint wall here. I took the flints about five years ago, to make a kiln.’

If there was a wall here, thinks Ruth, then the bones can hardly be new. She knows that she does not want the bones to be Scarlet’s. She does not want the parents to be the killers; she wants Scarlet to be alive.

The white suits step back and Ruth, carrying her excavation kit in her backpack, moves forward. She kneels on the edge of the hole, takes out her small trowel and gently scrapes away at the sides. The digging is clean, she can see the marks of the shovels, and the soil is arranged in neat layers, like a terrine. A thin layer of topsoil, then the characteristic peaty soil of the area, then a line of flint. At the bottom, about a metre down, Ruth sees the yellow-white of the bones.

‘Have you moved anything?’ she asks.

The white-suited man answers. ‘No. DCI Nelson told us not to.’ ‘Good.’

Wearing gloves, Ruth lifts a bone and holds it up to the light. She is aware of a collective intake of breath behind her.

Nelson leans forward and speaks into Ruth’s ear. She smells cigarettes and aftershave.

‘Are they human?’

‘I think so, yes.’

But ... ‘But what?’

‘They weren’t buried.’

Nelson squats down beside her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘A burial is a disturbance. It disturbs the layers. Everything would be churned up. Look at this.’ She gestures to the sides of

the hole. 'Here's the grave cut. Under all these layers. These bones were laid on the ground and, over the centuries, the earth has covered them.'

'Over the centuries?'

'I think they're Iron Age. Like the other ones.'

'Why?'

'There is some pottery there. It looks Iron Age.'

Nelson looks at her for a long moment before straightening up and calling out to the hovering scene-of-crime men.

'Right, that's it, boys. Excitement over.'

'What is it, boss?' asks one. *Boss!* Ruth can hardly believe her ears.

'The good news is it's a dead body. The bad news is it's been dead about two thousand years. Come on. Let's get out of here.'

*

An hour later, Ruth has bagged up the bones and sent them to the university lab for dating. Even so, she is sure they are Iron Age, but what does that mean? Because it wasn't buried in peat, this body has not been preserved, only the bones remain. Could these bones be linked to that other body, found on the edge of the Saltmarsh? And is there another link between bones, body, causeway and henge? Her mind is buzzing but she tries to concentrate on drinking herbal tea and talking to Scarlet's parents, Delilah and Alan as she has been instructed to call them.

She is not quite sure how she ended up here, in the Hendersons' chaotic kitchen, sitting on a rickety stool, balancing an earthenware mug in her hand. All she knows is that Nelson seemed very keen to accept the invitation on her behalf.

'We'd love to,' he had said. 'Thanks very much Mrs Henderson.'

'Delilah,' corrected Mrs Henderson wearily.

So now they are in the Henderson kitchen listening to Alan Henderson talking about dousing and to the Hendersons' youngest (Ocean) grizzling in her high chair.

'She misses Scarlet,' says Delilah with a resignation that Ruth finds hard to bear.

'I'm sure she does,' mumbles Ruth, 'How old is ... er ... Ocean?'

'She's two, Scarlet's four, Euan and Tobias are seven, Maddie's sixteen.'

‘You don’t look old enough to have a sixteen-year-old child.’

Delilah smiles, briefly illuminating her pale face with its heavy fringe of hair. ‘I was only sixteen when I had her. She’s not Alan’s, of course.’

Ruth glances briefly at Alan who is now lecturing Nelson on ley lines. Nelson looks up and catches Ruth’s eye.

‘Do you have children?’ Delilah asks Ruth.

‘No.’

‘What I’m afraid of,’ says Delilah suddenly in a high, strained voice, ‘is that one day someone asks me how many children I have and I say four, not five. Because then I’ll know that it’s over, that she’s dead.’ She is crying, but silently, the tears flowing down her cheeks.

Ruth doesn’t know what to say. ‘I’m sorry,’ is all she manages.

Delilah ignores her. ‘She’s so little, so defenceless. Her wrist is so tiny she can still wear her christening bracelet. Who would want to hurt her?’

Ruth thinks of Sparky, also little and defenceless and yet brutally murdered. She tries to imagine her own grief magnified by a thousand.

‘I don’t know, Delilah,’ says Ruth hoarsely. ‘But DCI Nelson is doing all he can, I promise you.’

‘He’s a good man,’ says Delilah, brushing a hand over her eyes. ‘He’s got a strong aura. He must have a good spirit guide.’

‘I’m sure he has.’

Ruth is conscious of Nelson’s eyes upon her. Alan has briefly stopped talking. He rolls a cigarette, hands shaking. Delilah gives a rice cake to Ocean who throws it on the floor.

Two dark-haired boys race into the room. To Ruth’s surprise they head straight for Nelson.

‘Harry! Did you bring your handcuffs?’

‘Can I try them on?’

‘It’s my turn!’

Solemnly, Nelson pulls a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and fits them round one of the boy’s hands. It makes Ruth feel slightly squeamish to see his bony wrists protruding from the restraining metal but there is no doubt that the boys are enjoying every minute.

‘My turn! Let me!’

‘I’ve only had a second. *Less* than a second.’

Ruth turns back to Delilah and sees, to her amazement, that she is now breast-feeding Ocean. Although Ruth has often signed petitions in favour of a woman's right to breast-feed in public, in practice she finds it deeply embarrassing. Especially as Ocean seems big enough to run to the corner shop for a packet of crisps.

Trying to avert her eyes, her gaze falls on a cork board over the kitchen table. It is covered in multi-coloured bits of paper: party invitations, torn-off special offers, children's drawings, photographs. She sees a picture of Scarlet holding baby Ocean and another of the twins holding a football trophy. Then she sees another photo. It is a faded snapshot of Delilah and Alan next to a standing stone, probably Stonehenge or possibly Avebury. But it is not the stone that catches Ruth's attention; it is the other person in the picture. Wearing jeans and a T-shirt and with normal length hair it is nonetheless definitely Cathbad.

CHAPTER 13

‘Are you sure it was him?’

‘Certain. He had short hair and ordinary clothes but it was him without a doubt.’

‘Bastard! I knew he was hiding something.’

‘It could be quite innocent.’

‘Then why didn’t he mention it when I interviewed him? He acted as if he’d hardly heard the name Henderson.’

Ruth and Nelson are in a pub near the harbour having a late lunch. Ruth had been surprised when Nelson suggested lunch, not least because it was three o’clock when they finally left the Hendersons’ house. But it seems that no landlord will refuse to serve a policeman complete with warrant card and now they are sitting in an almost empty bar looking out onto the quayside. The tide is high and swans glide silently past their window, oddly sinister in the fading light.

Ruth, slightly ashamed of being so hungry, tucks into a ploughman’s lunch. Nelson eats sausages and mash like someone refuelling, not noticing what he puts into his mouth. He has insisted on paying. Ruth drinks diet coke – she doesn’t want to be caught drink-driving after all – and Nelson chooses the full-fat variety.

‘My wife keeps nagging me to drink diet drinks,’ he says. ‘She says I’m overweight.’

‘Really,’ says Ruth drily. She has noticed before that you never see a thin person drinking a diet coke.

Nelson chews meditatively for a few minutes and then asks, ‘How long ago do you think the picture was taken?’

‘Hard to tell. Cathbad’s hair was dark and it’s quite grey now.’

‘More than ten years ago? Before you first met him?’

‘Maybe. His hair was long ten years ago but he could always have cut it in the meantime. Delilah looked young.’

‘She dresses like a teenager now.’

‘She’s very beautiful.’

Nelson grunts but says nothing.

‘She thinks you have a strong aura,’ says Ruth mischievously.

Nelson’s lips form the word ‘bollocks’ but he doesn’t say it

aloud. Instead he says, 'What did you think of Alan? Bit of an unlikely partner for her, wouldn't you say? With her being so beautiful and all.'

Ruth thinks of Alan Henderson, with his sharp, rodent's face and darting eyes. He does seem an unlikely husband for Delilah who, even in her distress, seemed somehow exotic. But then they have four children together so presumably the marriage works. 'The eldest child, Maddie, isn't his,' she says. 'Maybe she married him on the rebound.'

'How the hell do you know that?'

'She told me.'

Nelson smiles. 'I thought she'd talk to you.'

'Is that why you made us have tea with them?'

'I didn't. They offered.'

'And you accepted. For both of us.'

Nelson grins. 'I'm sorry. I just thought we might need to build bridges with them. After all, we'd been there all morning digging their garden up, all the neighbours watching. They must have felt like suspects. I thought they might appreciate a nice friendly chat. And I thought Delilah might open up to you.'

'Open up? About what?'

'Oh, I don't know,' says Nelson with what sounds like studied nonchalance. 'You'd be surprised what turns out to be useful.'

Ruth wonders whether Delilah did tell her anything 'useful'. Mostly it had just seemed unbearably sad.

'It was just horrible,' she says at last, 'to see them suffering so much and not to be able to do anything about it.'

Nelson nods soberly. 'It is horrible,' he says. 'That's when I hate my job the most.'

'It was so sad, the way Delilah kept referring to Scarlet in the present tense but we don't know if she's alive or dead.'

Nelson nods again. 'It's every parent's worst nightmare. The worst, the very worst. When you have children, suddenly the world seems such a terrifying place. Every stick and stone, every car, every animal, Christ, every person, is suddenly a terrible threat. You realise you'd do anything, *anything*, to keep them safe: steal, lie, kill, you name it. But sometimes there just isn't anything you can do. And that's the hardest thing.'

He stops and takes a swig of coke, maybe embarrassed at saying so much. Ruth watches him with something like wonder.

She thought she could understand what Delilah Henderson felt, losing a beautiful child like Scarlet, but the thought that Nelson should feel like that about the two stropic adolescents she had seen him with at the shopping centre seems almost unbelievable. Yet looking at his face as he stares into his glass, she does believe it.

*

Back home, trying half-heartedly to prepare her first lecture for next week, Ruth thinks about children. 'Do you have children?' Delilah had asked her. The implication was, if you don't, you won't understand. Nelson had understood. He might be an unreconstructed Northern policeman but he had children and that had given him access into the inner sanctum. He understood the terrible power of a parent's love.

Ruth doesn't have children and she has never been pregnant. Now that she is nearly forty and thinking that she might never have a child, it all seems such a waste. All that machinery chugging away inside her, making her bleed each month, making her moody and bloated and desperate for chocolate. All that internal plumbing, all those pipes gurgling away, all for nothing. At least Shona has been pregnant twice – and had two tearful abortions – at least she knows it all works. Ruth has no evidence at all that she can get pregnant. Maybe she can't and all those years of agonising over contraception were in vain. She remembers once with Peter when their condom broke and, in the sweaty heat of the moment, they had decided to carry on. She remembers how, the morning after, she had woken up thinking, perhaps this is it. Perhaps I'm pregnant, and the sheer power of that thought, its ability to throw everything else into acute relief. To know that you are carrying something secretly inside you. How can anything stay the same after that? But, of course, it hadn't been it. She wasn't pregnant and now she probably never will be.

Peter has a child. He will know the feelings described by Nelson. Would Peter kill for his son? Erik has three children, all now grown up. Ruth remembers him once saying that the greatest gift you can give a child is to set them free. Erik's children, scattered in London, New York and Tokyo, are certainly free, but

are Erik and Magda free of them? Once you have had a child, can you ever go back to being the person you were?

Ruth gets up to make herself tea. She feels twitchy and ill-at-ease. She told Erik she would be fine in the house on her own but she can't help thinking about Sparky and her brutal, horrible death. Iron Age man left dead bodies as messages to the Gods. Did Sparky's killer leave her body as a message to Ruth? Did the cat's body also mark a boundary? Come no further or I'll kill you, as I've killed Scarlet and Lucy. She shivers.

Flint squeezes in through the cat flap and Ruth picks him up and cuddles him. Flint endures her embrace whilst all the time looking hopefully at the floor. Child substitute, she thinks. Well, at least she has one.

Abandoning her work, she settles in front of the TV. *Have I Got News For You* is on but she can't lose herself in Ian Hislop's wit or Paul Merton's surreal brilliance. She keeps thinking about Scarlet Henderson's parents, waiting for her in that messy family house. Delilah aching to hold her daughter one more time, perhaps wishing she could have her back inside her body, where at least she had been safe.

When she puts her hand to her face, she realises that she is crying.

*

Now there is a new noise at night. It comes again and again. Three cries, one after the other, very low and echoey. The third cry always lasts the longest and is the most frightening. She's used to the other sounds at night, the snufflings and rustlings, the wind that has a voice of its own, a roaring angry shout. Sometimes it feels as if the wind is going to roar in through the trapdoor and snatch her up with its cold, angry breath. She imagines herself caught up, thrown high into the air, sailing through the clouds, looking down on all the houses and the people. Funny, she knows exactly what she will see. There's a little white house, very square, with a swing in the back garden. Sometimes there's a girl on the swing, going to and fro, laughing as she flies into the air. If she closes her eyes, she can still see the house and it's hard to believe that she hasn't actually floated there on top of the clouds, looking down on the girl and the swing and the neat rows of bright flowers.

Once she saw a face at the window. A monster's face. Grey-white with black stripes on either side. She kept very still, waiting for the monster to see her and gobble her up. But it hadn't. It had sort of sniffed at the bars with its wet black nose like those shoes that she had once had for best. Then it had gone away, clattering horribly over the glass. She has never seen it again.

The new sound is very close sometimes. It happens when the night is very dark and very cold. It wakes her up and she shivers, wrapping her blanket around her. It comes once, twice, three times. She doesn't know why but she thinks it might be calling to her. Once she calls back, 'I'm here! Let me out!' and the sound of her own voice is the scariest thing of all.

CHAPTER 14

In the morning, Nelson brings Sparky's body back. He stands on the doorstep, holding the ominous-looking cardboard box, looking like a salesman who is uncertain of his welcome.

Ruth, still bleary-eyed before her first coffee, squints at him.

'I did promise.' Nelson indicates the box.

'Yes. Thank you. Come in. I'll make us some coffee.'

'Coffee would be grand.'

He puts the box carefully on the floor by the sofa. They both avoid looking at it. Ruth busies herself with the coffee and Nelson stands in the sitting room, looking around with a slight frown. Ruth is reminded of the first time she saw him, in the corridor at the university, and the impression she had of him being too big for the room. That is certainly the case here. Nelson, looming in his heavy black jacket, makes the tiny cottage seem even smaller. Erik is tall but he had seemed able to fold himself up into the space. Nelson looks as if he might, at any second, knock something over or bash his head against the ceiling.

'Lots of books,' he says, when Ruth comes in with coffee and biscuits on a tray.

'Yes, I love reading.'

Nelson grunts. 'The wife belongs to a book club. All they do is moan about their husbands. They never talk about the bloody books at all.'

'How do you know?'

'I've listened when they meet at our place.'

'Maybe they talk about the books when you're not listening.'

Nelson acknowledges this with a slight smile.

'Did you find anything?' asks Ruth, 'from ... from Sparky?'

Nelson takes a gulp of coffee and shakes his head. 'We won't know until tomorrow at the earliest. I've had the letters tested again as well. We're checking the prints and DNA results against known offenders.'

Ruth wonders what has prompted this course of action. Nelson sounds very much as if he has a 'known offender' in mind. Before she can ask, Nelson puts down his coffee cup and looks at his watch.

‘Have you got a spade?’ he asks briskly.

Now the moment has come, Ruth feels curiously reluctant to go out into the garden and bury Sparky. She wants to stay inside drinking coffee and pretending that nothing bad has happened. But she knows it can’t be put off and so she gets her coat and shows Nelson to the tool shed.

Ruth’s garden is a tiny square of wind-blown grass. When she first moved in she had tried to plant things but they were always the wrong things and nothing ever seemed to grow except thistles and wild lavender. Next door, the weekenders have a smart deck which, in summer, they adorn with terracotta pots. Today, though, it looks as forlorn and empty as Ruth’s garden. David’s garden is even more overgrown though it does contain an elaborate bird table complete with a device to repel cats (Ruth fears it doesn’t work).

There is a dwarf apple tree at the end of the garden and it is here that Ruth asks Nelson to dig the grave. It is odd watching someone else dig. He does it all wrong, bending his back rather than his legs, but he does the job quickly enough. Ruth looks into the neat hole and automatically checks out the layers: topsoil, alluvial clay, chalk. Flint watches them from the apple tree, tail flicking. Nelson hands Ruth the box. It feels pathetically light. Ruth wants to look inside but she knows that this would not be a good idea. Instead, she drops a kiss on the cardboard lid, ‘Goodbye Sparky,’ and then she places the box in the grave.

Ruth gets another spade and helps Nelson fill in the hole and, for a few minutes, the only sound in the garden is their breathing as they shovel in the heavy earth. Nelson has taken off his jacket and hung it on the apple tree. Flint has disappeared.

When the hole is filled in, Nelson and Ruth look at each other. Ruth feels as if she understands now why burials are therapeutic. Earth to earth. She has buried Sparky but her cat will always be there, part of the garden, part of her life. Then she remembers the Lucy letters. *Lucy lies deep below the ground but she will rise again.* She shakes her head, trying to rid herself of the words.

‘What about the candle?’ she asks Nelson.

‘I’ll do it on Sunday. A decade of the rosary too.’

‘Only a decade?’

‘Two decades and a Glory Be for luck.’

They look at each other over the newly dug grave and smile.

Ruth feels that she ought to say something but, somehow, silence feels right just then. Geese call, high overhead, and a light rain starts to fall.

‘I’d better be going,’ says Nelson, but he doesn’t move.

Ruth looks at him, the rain falling softly on her hair. Nelson smiles, an oddly gentle smile. Ruth opens her mouth to speak but the silence is broken by a voice that seems to come from another world, another existence.

‘Ruth! What are you doing out here?’

It is Peter.

*

When Nelson drives away, gruff and professional once more, Ruth makes more coffee and sits at the table with Peter.

He looks good, thinks Ruth. His gingery blond hair is shorter, he is about a stone lighter and he even has a tan, something so unusual (Peter has typical redhead’s skin) that it makes him look almost shockingly different.

‘You’re looking well,’ says Peter.

‘I’m not,’ says Ruth bluntly, aware that she is wearing no make-up and that her hair has gone crinkly from the rain.

There is a short silence.

‘Who was that man again?’ asks Peter.

‘It’s a long story,’ says Ruth.

Peter is a good audience. He is satisfyingly shocked at the death of Sparky – he did love the cats, she remembers – and properly fascinated by the Iron Age bodies and the causeway. She tells him a little about the police investigations, but not about the letters, and he says that he has read about the Scarlet Henderson case.

‘Poor little girl. Terrible for the parents. Do the police really think that the murderer might have killed Sparky as a sort of warning to you?’

‘It’s a possibility, they think.’

‘God, Ruth. You do live, don’t you?’

Ruth doesn’t reply. She thinks she detects a tinge of envy in Peter’s voice for her supposedly exciting life. She wants to tell him that, far from being excited, she actually feels lonely and rather scared. She looks at him, wondering how honest she wants

to be.

It is odd to see Peter in the cottage again. He and Ruth had lived here together for a year. Ruth bought the cottage a few years after the henge dig, still drawn to the Saltmarsh and its eerie, desolate beauty. By that time she and Peter had been living together for two years and there was some talk of their buying the place together. Ruth had resisted, at the time she wasn't even sure why, and Peter had given in. The little cottage was hers alone, and she remembers that when Peter moved out, the house didn't even seem to notice. There were a few gaps on the walls and in her bookshelves but, on the whole, the house seemed to close in on her, satisfied. At last they were alone.

'I've missed this place,' says Peter, looking out of the window.

'Have you?'

'Yes, living in London you never get to see the sky. There's so much sky here.'

Ruth looks out at the expanse of stormy, gunmetal sky where the lowering clouds are chasing each other over the marshes.

'Lots of sky,' she agrees. 'But not much else.'

'I like it,' says Peter, 'I like the loneliness.'

'So do I,' says Ruth.

Peter is looking sadly into his coffee cup. 'Poor little Sparky,' he says. 'I remember when we first brought her home. She was no bigger than that squeaky mouse toy we bought her.'

Ruth can't take much more of this. 'Come on,' she says. 'Let's go for a walk. I'll show you the causeway.'

*

The wind has grown stronger and, as they walk, they have to lower their heads to stop the sand blowing into their eyes. Ruth would be happy to stomp along in silence but Peter seems keen to chat. He tells her about his work, his recent skiing trip (hence the tan) and his views on the government, which had just been elected that heady summer ten years ago. He doesn't, once, mention Victoria or Daniel. Ruth tells him about her work, her family and the Iron Age bodies.

'What does Erik think?' asks Peter. He is walking fast, striding over the uneven ground. Ruth almost has to jog to keep up with him.

‘He thinks they’re all connected.’

‘Oh yes.’ Peter adopts a thick Norwegian accent. ‘The sacred site, the power of the landscape, the gateway between life and death.’

Ruth laughs. ‘Exactly. Phil, on the other hand, thinks it’s all coincidence pending geophysics reports and radiocarbon dating.’

‘What do *you* think?’

Ruth pauses. She realises that Erik never once asked her this question.

‘I think they’re connected,’ she says at last. ‘The first Iron Age body marks the beginning of the marsh, the causeway leads almost straight to the henge which marks the point where the marsh became tidal. I don’t know about the Spenwell bones but they must mark a boundary of some sort. Boundaries are important. Even now, look how important it is that we keep things in their proper place. “Keep your distance” people say. I think prehistoric people knew how to keep their distance.’

‘You were always keen on your own space,’ says Peter, slightly bitterly.

Ruth looks at him. ‘This isn’t about me.’

‘Isn’t it?’

They have reached the first buried post.

Peter pats the oak stump meditatively. ‘Will you have to uproot the posts?’

‘Erik doesn’t want to.’

‘I remember all that fuss when we dug up the henge. The druids tying themselves to the posts and the police dragging them away.’

‘Yes.’ Ruth remembers it too. Vividly. ‘The only thing is ... we did find out a hell of a lot about the henge by excavating. The type of axe used to chop the wood down, for example. We even found some of the rope used to tow it.’

‘Honeysuckle rope wasn’t it?’

‘You’ve got a good memory.’

‘I remember everything about that summer.’

Seeing Peter looking at her intently, Ruth avoids his gaze. She stares at the sea, where the waves are breaking a long way out, white against the grey. A stone skims past her, jumping once, twice, three times.

Ruth turns to look at Peter who grins, flexing his arm.

‘You were always good at that,’ says Ruth.

‘It’s a man thing.’

They are silent for a moment, watching the waves come closer and closer to their feet. There is always the temptation, thinks Ruth, to stay just a little bit too long, to stand on the water’s edge until the spray actually gets you. And it’s not always the wave you expect, the spectacular breakers hurling themselves against the shore. Sometimes it’s the sneaky waves, the ones that come from nowhere, sucking the sand away from your feet; sometimes it’s these waves that take you by surprise.

‘Peter,’ says Ruth at last, ‘why are you here?’

‘I told you, to research my book.’

Ruth continues to look at him. The wind is whipping the sand up into a storm. It flies in their faces, like a fine gritty rain. Ruth rubs her eyes, tasting salt in the air. Peter, too, brushes sand out of his eyes. When he looks back at Ruth, his eyes are red.

‘Victoria and I, we’ve split up. I suppose I ... I just wanted to come back.’

Ruth takes a deep breath that is almost a sigh. Somehow, she thinks, she had known this all along. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘I don’t know.’ Peter speaks into the wind so it is hard for her to catch his words. ‘I suppose I wanted everything to be like it was before.’

After a few minutes, they turn round and walk back towards the house.

*

Halfway back, it starts to rain; sharp, horizontal rain that seems to sting their faces. Ruth has her head down and doesn’t realise that they have drifted right, northwards, until she sees the hide in front of her. She has never seen this hide before, although she remembers it from the map. It is on a shingle spit, almost at the tide mark. You would need to be an extremely determined bird-watcher, she thinks, to venture this far across the marsh.

‘Ruth!’

Blinded by rain, Ruth looks up to see David standing by the hide holding a plastic bag which looks as though it contains litter. She remembers Nelson shouting at his subordinate to bag up the

litter from another hide, the first time she met him.

‘Hallo,’ says Ruth. ‘Clearing up?’

‘Yes.’ David’s face is dark. ‘They never learn. There are notices everywhere and still they leave their crap all over the place.’

Ruth tuts sympathetically and introduces Peter, who comes forward to shake hands.

‘David is the warden of the bird sanctuary,’ she says though she does not explain who Peter is.

‘Must be an interesting job,’ says Peter.

‘It is,’ says David with sudden animation. ‘This is a wonderful place for birds, especially in winter.’

‘I came here years ago, for a dig,’ says Peter, ‘but I’ve never really got it out of my system. It’s so lonely and so peaceful.’

David looks curiously from Ruth to Peter and then he says, ‘I saw a police car outside your house, Ruth.’

‘Yes,’ Ruth sighs. ‘You know I’m helping the police with an investigation, with the forensic side.’

‘Ruth’s cat was killed,’ Peter cuts in, to Ruth’s annoyance. ‘The police think it might be significant.’

Now David looks really shocked. ‘Your cat was killed? How?’

Frowning at Peter, Ruth says shortly, ‘Her throat was cut. They think it could be linked to the investigation.’

‘My God. How awful!’ David makes a gesture as if to touch Ruth’s arm but doesn’t quite make contact.

‘Yes, well, I was upset. I was ... fond of her.’

‘Of course you were. She was company.’ He says it like he knows the importance of company.

‘Yes, she was.’

They stand there awkwardly for a few minutes, in the rain, and then Ruth says, ‘We’d better be getting back.’

‘Yes,’ says David, squinting towards the horizon. ‘The tide’s coming in.’

‘I nearly drowned once on these mudflats,’ says Peter chattily. ‘Got cut off by the tide.’

‘Easy to do,’ says David. ‘The tide comes in faster than a galloping horse, they say.’

‘Let’s gallop off then,’ says Ruth. She is fed up with both of them.

As they trudge away, Peter says, ‘Funny chap. Do you know him well?’

‘Not really. I’ve only really spoken to him in the last few months. Which is why’ – she glares at Peter – ‘I don’t want him to know all my business.’

Peter laughs. ‘I was only being friendly. Remember that, Ruth? Friendly?’

Ruth is about to retort when her phone rings. For some reason she knows it will be Nelson.

It is a text, short and to the point.

Have arrested Malone. His prints on letters. HN.

CHAPTER 15

‘We’ve got to do something,’ says Erik. ‘The police haven’t got a suspect so they’re trying to frame Cathbad. We can’t let them get away with it.’

‘Apparently his fingerprints were on the letters,’ says Ruth cautiously.

‘Fingerprints, huh! You think they can’t fake evidence? You think they aren’t capable of that?’

Ruth says nothing and Erik gets up to pace angrily around the tiny office. They are at the university. Term has started and Ruth has a student consultation in ten minutes. However, Erik, who has been ranting against the police for the last half hour, shows no sign of leaving.

‘What have the letters got to do with anything, anyway? Writing a letter doesn’t make him a murderer. There’s nothing that links him to that little girl. Nothing.’

Ruth thinks back to the photo in the Hendersons’ kitchen. She now knows that there is something that links Cathbad to the Hendersons, something definitely tangible. Does this make him a murderer? His fingerprints were on the letters. Does this make him the author? Ruth thinks about the letters. Cathbad knows about mythology, he knows about archaeology, he is fanatically interested in the Saltmarsh. She has to admit he is a likely candidate. But why would he do it? Is he really capable of killing a little girl and taunting the police with clues? And Lucy Downey? Could he have killed her too?

‘I don’t know,’ she says, ‘I don’t know any more than you.’

This isn’t quite true. After receiving his text, Ruth rang Nelson. His phone was switched off but he rang her later that evening. Peter had finally gone home and she was once again trying to work.

Nelson sounded excited, almost jubilant. ‘Turned out we had his prints on file. He’d been arrested a few times before, demonstrations, that sort of thing. That’s why I tested again. We got a match an hour ago. And we’ve got a link to Scarlet.’

‘Does he admit anything?’

‘No.’ A harsh laugh. ‘Says it’s all a set-up, wicked police state

and all that. But he can't deny he knows the Hendersons: turns out he's the father of the eldest girl.'

'What?'

'Yes. He knew Delilah Henderson when she was still at school. He was a student at Manchester, she lived nearby. They had an affair and the result was Madeleine. Apparently they lived together for a bit but then she left him for another bloke.'

'Alan Henderson?'

'No, someone else. He came later. Anyway, she left Malone and he claims he hasn't seen her to this day. Had no idea she was living nearby.'

'He must have seen her on the TV. When Scarlet first went missing.'

'Hasn't got a TV. Harmful rays, apparently, polluting the atmosphere. Hasn't got a mobile phone because of the radiation. Nutcase.'

'Do you think he is mad?'

'Don't you believe it. Cunning as a nest of snakes.'

'How long can you hold him?'

'Twenty-four hours. But I'll apply for an extension.'

'Will you tell the press?'

'Not if I can help it.'

But someone did tell them, because that night on the nine o'clock radio news Ruth heard that 'a local man has been arrested in connection with the disappearance of four-year-old Scarlet Henderson.' She had switched on the TV news and, immediately, Nelson's face, dark and forbidding, had filled the screen.

'Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson,' intoned the newsreader, 'who, up to now, has had to admit no progress in the case of little Scarlet Henderson, was tonight unavailable for comment.' As if to prove this, Nelson swept past the hovering reporters and bounded up the steps to the police station. Ruth watched fascinated, feeling slightly smug despite herself that she knew what the inside of the station looked like, could imagine Nelson in his ungainly slice of room examining the evidence, shouting impatiently for coffee, looking again at the laughing face of Scarlet Henderson on the wall.

'The man is believed to be forty-two-year-old Michael Malone, a lab technician at North Norfolk University.'

Jesus, thought Ruth, they know his name. Now all hell will

break loose.

And it had. This morning, Ruth had been stopped at the university gates and asked to show her ID. Nodding her through, the policeman had told her to avoid the chemistry wing. Naturally this had aroused her curiosity and she had driven straight round to find the entrance to the chemistry department completely blocked by cars, trailers, even a portaloos. TV camera crews jostled to and fro, waving giant fluffy microphones. Anyone entering the building was greeted by a hysterical babble of questions, 'Do you know Michael Malone? Who is he? What sort of ...' Ruth heard French, Italian, even, she thought, an American accent. Hastily she backed away to the relative calm of the archaeology block.

Erik had arrived an hour later, eyes blazing, white hair flying.

'Have you heard? Have you heard?'

'Yes.'

'What are you going to do about it?'

'Me? What can I do?'

'You're friendly with this policeman, this Neanderthal, aren't you?'

'Not exactly friendly ...'

Erik had looked at her narrowly. 'That's not what Cathbad said. He said you and this Nelson turned up together to interview him. Very cosy. He said there was a definite chemistry between you.'

'Bollocks.' Unthinkingly, Ruth employs Nelson's favourite word.

Erik didn't seem to have heard her. 'It is obvious that this Nelson is using Cathbad as a scapegoat and you, Ruth, you delivered Cathbad to him. On a plate.'

The sheer unfairness of this made Ruth gasp. 'I didn't! I asked *you* if you remembered his name. *You* told me.'

'And you told Nelson.'

'He would have found him anyway.'

'Would he? He seems a complete incompetent to me. No, he used you to deliver Cathbad. He used you, Ruth.'

'What if Cathbad did do it?' Ruth countered angrily. 'Don't you want the murderer to be found?'

Erik smiled pityingly. 'Ruth, Ruth. He really has got to you, hasn't he? You're even thinking like a policeman.'

That had been an hour ago and Ruth and Erik are still circling the topic furiously. Ruth is angry that Erik thinks her a patsy, a

fool who has been used by the cynical Nelson in his attempt to pin the crime on Cathbad. But, secretly, she does feel slightly guilty. She suggested Cathbad to Nelson. She pointed him in the direction of the henge and the dig ten years ago. If Cathbad didn't do it, his life could be ruined by this notoriety. He could even go to prison for a crime he didn't commit. But what if he did do it?

'I don't know what's going on,' she says again.

Erik looks at her, his blue eyes cold. 'Then find out, Ruthie.'

Then, just as Ruth thinks it can't get any worse, Phil puts his head round the door.

'I couldn't help overhearing, it's a teeny bit loud in here. How are you Erik?' He puts out his hand. After a second's pause, Erik takes it.

'Fine apart from an innocent man being under arrest.'

'Oh that poor soul from the chemistry department. Do you know him?'

'Yes. A former student of mine.'

'No!' Phil's eyes are round with interest. 'Is he an archaeologist then?'

'He did a postgraduate degree at Manchester.'

'How did he end up here?'

Erik gestures towards Ruth, who is sitting behind her desk, as if for protection. 'Ask Ruth, she knows.'

'Ruth, are you involved in all this?'

'You knew I was helping with the case.'

'Just with the bones, I thought.'

This, Ruth realises, is how Phil sees her. Only concerned with bones, a dull specialisation, useful but ultimately marginal. She is not a heroine type like Shona, she does not belong centre stage.

'Ruth gave Cathbad's name to the police,' says Erik spitefully.

'Cathbad?' Phil looks confused.

'Erik knows Michael Malone as Cathbad,' Ruth shoots back.

'They're old friends.'

Phil glances from Ruth to Erik, enthralled. 'Are you?' he asks. 'Old friends?'

'Yes,' hisses Erik, 'and I'm going to clear my old friend's name.'

And he sweeps out, colliding in the doorway with Ruth's student, a polite Chinese man called Mr Tan, who is most surprised to find himself at the receiving end of a stream of Norwegian invective.

‘I’ll leave you to it, Ruth,’ says Phil. ‘Let’s catch up later.’

Not if I can help it, thinks Ruth. She turns to Mr Tan. ‘I’m so sorry. We were going to talk about your dissertation. What was it about again?’

‘Decomposition,’ says Mr Tan.

*

Ruth has to battle past the reporters again on her way home. The news reports gave no further developments in the case. ‘Police have been granted another twenty-four hours to question the suspect, believed to be forty-two-year-old Michael Malone from Blakeney.’

Ruth switches off the radio. She still feels uneasy about Cathbad’s arrest. Although she doesn’t, like Erik, think that Cathbad is simply a scapegoat, equally it is hard to think of him as a murderer. Yet he *could* conceivably be the author of those letters. Erik hasn’t read them. He can’t hear the erudite, sinister, taunting voice. *She lies where the earth meets the sky. Where the roots of the great tree Yggdrasil reach down into the next life ... She has become the perfect sacrifice. Blood on stone. Scarlet on white.* Thinking of Cathbad in his wizard’s chair, the dream-catchers glittering around him, Ruth can imagine him writing these lines. But abducting and killing a little girl? He is the father of Scarlet’s half-sister, how could he possibly have done this to Scarlet? To Delilah, whom presumably he had once loved?

And what about Lucy Downey, all those years ago? Ruth thinks of Cathbad in his prime, purple cloak fluttering, exhorting his followers to stand firm against the police and the archaeologists. She has a vision of him standing within the timber circle, arms aloft, as the seawater swirls around his feet and the other druids clamber to safety. She had thought at the time that if conviction could stop the tide the sea would surely turn in its tracks. But of course it hadn’t, and ten minutes later Cathbad too was scrambling for the higher ground, holding his sodden robe above his knees. Could this man – ridiculous, impressive, passionate – really be a killer? Is it possible that a few months after that stand at the henge Cathbad had kidnapped Lucy Downey and killed her?

When she reaches the Saltmarsh, the tide is out and the birds

are coming in to feed, their white feathers catching the last of the setting sun. Watching them, Ruth thinks of David, his face transformed as he talked about the migrating birds; and of Peter, saying sadly that he just wanted to come back.

Going back. When Ruth met Peter she was not yet thirty. She had been newly appointed to the job at North Norfolk University and was full of energy and enthusiasm. Peter, a history research fellow at the University of East Anglia, had heard on the academic grapevine about the dig. He had simply turned up one morning with his backpack and bedroll and asked if they wanted help. They had teased him for being a city boy – though he was actually from Wiltshire and had spent five years in the Australian outback. They laughed at the straw hat that he wore to keep the sun off his pale skin, at his lack of knowledge of archaeological terms. He had always referred to the Pleistocene as the plastocene and could never remember which came first, Bronze Age or Iron Age. Yet he was obsessed with the henge and listened enthralled to Erik's tales of ritual and sacrifice. It was he who had found the first oak stump, exposed when a summer storm had blown the sand away from its base. Peter had been frantically digging around the stump when he had been caught by the tide and eventually rescued by Erik.

It was that evening that she realised she loved him, Ruth remembers. They had always got on well together, teaming up on the dig, laughing at the same things. Erik's wife, Magda, had noticed, and often seemed to contrive to leave the two of them together. Once she had read Ruth's palm and told her that a tall red-haired stranger was about to come into her life. Once Ruth had cut herself and Peter had helped her put on the plaster; the touch of his hand had made her tremble. And as they sat by the campfire on the evening of his near-drowning, Ruth had looked at Peter and thought: now, it has to be now. He could have drowned today, we mustn't waste any more time. And she remembers smiling to herself because it seemed such a momentous, and yet such a joyful, thought. Peter had looked up and met her eyes. He had got up and suggested a walk to collect samphire. Magda had discouraged anyone else from accompanying them. They had walked to the water's edge, the sound of the sea rustling in the dark and, smiling, had walked into each other's arms.

And now, as Ruth lets herself into her cottage, she wonders if

she really wants Peter back in her life. After the walk on Sunday, he has called twice but she hasn't seen him again. He is staying nearby, she could call him tonight, suggest going out for a drink, but she knows she won't. She is not sure what Peter means by 'coming back'. Does he mean coming back to *her*? And, if so, is that what she wants? Having ended the relationship, with so much heart-searching, does she really want them to get together again? And why does the new slightly bitter Peter seem more attractive than the adoring Peter of five years ago?

Inside the cottage a clock ticks lugubriously and the seabirds are calling from the marshes. Otherwise, all is silent. Flint, who is obviously nervous without Sparky, leaps down from the sofa back, making Ruth jump. There is something ominous in the silence, she realises, as if the house is waiting for something. Her footsteps, as she goes to the kitchen to feed Flint, echo on the floorboards. The radio is no help – the reception is so bad that all she can hear are muffled crackles, as if the announcer has been gagged and is struggling for freedom. This is so disconcerting that she switches it off and the silence returns, heavier than ever.

Ruth makes herself some tea and sits at her computer, meaning to do some work. But the silence is still at her back, making the hairs on her neck rise. She swings round. Flint is lying on the sofa again but he is not asleep. He is watchful, alert, looking beyond her, towards the window and the twilight. Is there something out there? Summoning up all her courage, Ruth goes to the door and opens it noisily. Nothing. Only the birds wheeling and calling as they fly inland. A long way off, she can hear the sea. The tide is turning.

Ruth slams the door shut and, as an afterthought, puts on the security chain. Then she pulls the curtains and sits down to work.

But the Lucy letters insist on running through her mind. The same phrases, over and over again. *You are looking for Lucy but you are looking in the wrong places ... Look where the land lies. Look at the cursuses and the causeways.*

Ruth rubs her eyes. Flint jumps onto the table and rubs his head against her hand. Mechanically, she strokes him. She is missing something, she knows it. It is as if she has all the evidence from a dig, all the pottery shards and flakes of flint, all the soil samples, and she can't put it together to make a proper picture. What did Erik say? *The most important thing is the*

direction.

Ruth gets out her map of North Norfolk. She traces a line from Spenwell, where the bones were found in the Hendersons' garden, to the bones at the edge of the Saltmarsh. She catches her breath. The line, cutting through Spenwell village and the dual carriageway, is almost exactly straight. Trembling slightly, she continues the line along the route marked by the causeway. It leads where she always thought it would: the line points, as straight as an arrow, to the centre of the henge circle. To the sacred ground.

She looks down at her page of notes. Under the heading 'Cursuses' she has written: 'Can be seen as lines pointing to sacred places. Longest cursus in Britain = 10 km. Sight lines – tell you where to look.'

The house is still waiting, it is dark outside now and even the birds are silent. With a shaking hand Ruth reaches for her phone. 'Nelson? I think I know where Scarlet is buried.'

CHAPTER 16

They wait for the tide and set off at first light. When they return from the henge circle, with Scarlet's body zipped into a police body bag, Ruth is driven back to her house. She left Nelson in the car park where they first found the bones. He is waiting for a policewoman to arrive so they can break the news to Scarlet's parents. Ruth doesn't offer to accompany them. She knows it is pure cowardice, but right at this moment she would rather run into the sea and drown herself than face Delilah Henderson. Nelson presumably feels the same but he still has to do it. He doesn't speak to Ruth, or to the scene-of-crime officers who arrive promptly in their white jumpsuits. He stands apart, looking so forbidding that no-one dares approach him.

On the way home Ruth asks the driver to stop so she can be sick. She is sick again, back in the cottage, listening to the radio news. 'Police searching for four-year-old Scarlet Henderson have found a body believed to be that of the missing child. Police sources are refusing to confirm ...' The missing child. How can those few words convey the horrific pathos of the little arm encircled by the silver bracelet? The little girl taken from the people who loved her: murdered, buried in the sand, covered by the sea. When had he buried her? At night? If she had looked would Ruth have seen lights, like will o'the wisps, guiding her to the dead child?

She calls Phil and tells him that she won't be coming in. He is agog but remembers to feel sorry for Scarlet's parents: 'Poor people, it doesn't bear thinking about.' But Ruth has to think about it, all day long. Ten minutes later, Peter phones. Does Ruth want him to come over? She says no, she is fine. She doesn't want to see Peter; she doesn't want to see anyone.

By midday, the Saltmarsh is seething with people. It has started to rain again but still she can see little figures crawling over the sands and, in the distance, the lights of police boats out to sea. A new gaggle of journalists swarms past, screeching and cackling like flocks of feeding birds. Ruth sees David standing outside his house, binoculars in hand, looking thunderous. He must hate the Saltmarsh being invaded like this. The birds have been frightened

away and the skies are low and dark. Thank God Sammy and Ed have gone back to London so Ruth doesn't have to bear their curiosity and concern. She pulls the curtains. Thank God too that the press haven't caught up with her yet.

Erik rings. He is conciliatory, concerned. Ruth wishes she didn't think that he is as much concerned with the archaeological site as with Scarlet's fate. The police are digging madly in the very centre of the henge circle. For Erik, as for David, the site will be contaminated forever. He can hardly say this, though, and after a few platitudes he rings off.

Despite everything, she is still shocked when she switches on the TV news and sees the Saltmarsh, rainwashed and grey, filling the screen. 'It was at this desolate spot,' intones the newsreader, 'that police made the tragic discovery, early this morning ...' No mention of Ruth. Thank you, God.

The phone rings. Ruth's mother. Not such good work, God.

'Ruth! It's on TV. That awful place where you live.'

'I know Mum.'

'They've found her, that poor little girl. Our Bible study group has been praying for her every night.'

'I know.'

'Daddy said he saw your house on TV AM.'

'I'm sure he did.'

'Isn't it terrible? Daddy says be sure to lock your windows and doors.'

'I will.'

'That poor little girl. Such a pretty little thing. Did you see her picture on the news?'

Should Ruth tell her mother that she was the one who found the body? Who lifted up the little arm, miraculously preserved by the peat, and looked at the silver bracelet, decorated with entwined hearts? Should she tell her mother that she saw an identical bracelet on Delilah Henderson's wrist as they sat chatting in her kitchen? Should she tell her that she watched as the little body was lifted from its grave and the hand dangled down, as if in farewell? Should she tell her mother that she knows the murderer, even if she does not know his name, that she hears his voice in her dreams? Should she tell her about Sparky, left bleeding on her doorstep as a threat, or a warning?

No, she won't tell her any of these things. Instead she promises

to lock her doors and to ring tomorrow. She feels too tired even to argue when her mother says she hopes the child was baptised and so can go to heaven.

‘Who wants to go to heaven with all those Christians?’ has always been Ruth’s response. Now she thinks about Alan and Delilah Henderson. Do they think they will see Scarlet again, that they will be reunited in a better place? She hopes so. She really hopes so.

The rain continues to fall, somewhat thwarting the journalists who tramp back along New Road, their mobile phones subdued by frustration. Ruth, who hasn’t eaten all day, pours herself a glass of wine and switches on the radio. ‘What does the death of little Scarlet Henderson tell us about our society ...’ She switches it off again. She doesn’t want to hear people, people who have never seen Scarlet, talk about lessons learnt or the decline of morals or why children are no longer safe to play. Scarlet wasn’t safe; she was snatched from her garden while she played on the makeshift climbing frame with her twin brothers. Neither of them had seen anything. One minute Scarlet was there, the next she wasn’t. Delilah, inside the house with a fretful Ocean, had not even known that her daughter was missing until she called her in for tea, two hours later. Forensics will have to prove when Scarlet was actually killed. Ruth prays it was soon, while she was still happy from the game with her brothers, before she knew too much.

It is dark outside now. Ruth pours herself another glass of wine. The phone rings. Ruth picks it up wearily. Peter? Erik? Her mother?

‘Doctor Ruth Galloway?’ An unfamiliar voice, slightly breathless.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m from *The Chronicle*.’ The local paper. ‘I hear you were involved with the discovery of Scarlet Henderson’s body?’

‘I’ve got nothing to say.’ Ruth slams down the phone, hands shaking. Immediately it rings again and she takes it off the hook.

Flint crashes in through the cat flap, making Ruth jump sky high. She feeds him and tries to get him to sit on her lap but he too is twitchy, prowling round the room with his head low and whiskers quivering.

It is nine o’clock. Ruth, who has been up since four, is

exhausted but feels too strung up to go to bed. Neither, for some reason, can she read or watch TV. She just sits there, in the dark, watching Flint circling the room and listening to the rain drumming against the windows.

Ten o'clock and a heavy knock on the door sends Flint running upstairs. Though she doesn't quite know why, Ruth is trembling from head to foot. She switches on a light and edges towards the door. Though the rational archaeologist in her tells her that it is probably only Peter or Erik or Shona (who surprisingly hasn't rung yet), the irrational side, which has been taking hold all day, tells her that something dreadful lurks outside the door. Something terrible arisen from the mud and the sand. *What the Sand gets, the Sand keeps forever.*

'Who is it?' she calls out, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Me. Nelson,' comes the reply.

Ruth opens the door.

Nelson looks terrible, unshaven, red-eyed, his clothes soaking. He steps wordlessly into the sitting room and sits down on the sofa. It seems, at that moment, completely right that he should be there.

'Do you want anything to drink?' she asks. 'Tea? Coffee? Wine?'

'Coffee please.'

When she comes back with the coffee, Nelson is leaning forward on the sofa, his head in his hands. Ruth notices the amount of grey in his thick, dark hair. Surely he can't have aged in just a few months?

Ruth puts the coffee on the table beside him. 'Was it terrible?' she asks timidly.

Nelson groans, rubbing his hands over his face. 'Terrible,' he says at last, 'Delilah just ... just crumpled up like someone had squeezed all the life out of her. She just collapsed and lay there, curled up in a ball, crying, calling out for Scarlet. Nothing any of us could say was any good. How could it be? Her husband tried to hold her but she fought him off. Judy, the DC, was very good, but what could anyone say? Jesus. I've broken bad news before in my time but never anything like this. If I go to hell tomorrow, it can't be worse than this.'

He is silent again for a few moments, frowning into his coffee mug. Ruth puts her hand on his arm but says nothing: what can

anyone say?

Eventually Nelson says, 'I hadn't really understood how much she believed that Scarlet was still alive. I think we all thought ... after two months ... she must be dead. Like with Lucy, you gradually stop hoping. But Delilah, poor cow, really believed that her little girl was going to walk back in through the front door one day. At first she kept saying, "She can't be dead, she can't be dead." I had to tell her, "I've seen her," and then, Christ, I had to ask them to identify the body.'

'Did they both go?'

'I wanted Alan to go on his own but Delilah insisted on coming too. I think, right up to the moment that she saw the body, she was still hoping it wasn't Scarlet. When she saw the body, that's when she collapsed.'

'Do they know how long ... how long she'd been dead?'

'No. We'll have to wait for the forensic report.' He sighs, rubbing his eyes. Then, speaking for the first time in his business-like, policeman's voice, 'She didn't look like she'd been dead long, did she?'

'That was the peat,' says Ruth, 'it's a natural preservative.'

They are silent again for a moment, deep in their own thoughts. Ruth thinks of the peat, preserving the timbers of the henge and now guarding its new secret. If they had never found her would Scarlet, like the Iron Age bodies, have been left there for hundreds, thousands of years? Would she have been found by archaeologists, puzzled over as an academic curiosity, her real history forever unknown?

'I've had another letter,' Nelson says, breaking the silence.

'What?'

In answer, Nelson brings a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. 'It's a copy,' he explains. 'Original's with forensics.'

Ruth leans forward to read:

Nelson,

You seek but you do not find. You find bones where you hope to find flesh. All flesh is grass. I have told you this before. I grow tired of your foolishness, your inability to see. Do I have to draw a map for you? Point a line to Lucy and to Scarlet? The nearer the bone, the sweeter the flesh. Do not forget the bones.

In sorrow.

Ruth looks at Nelson. 'When did you get this?'

'Today. In the post. It was sent yesterday.'

'So, when Cathbad was in custody?'

'Yes.' Nelson looks up. 'Doesn't mean he couldn't have arranged to have it sent though.'

'Do you think that's what he did?'

'Maybe. Or this letter could be from a different person.'

'It reads like the others,' says Ruth, examining the typewritten paper. 'Biblical quotation, the tone, the reference to sight. It even says "I have told you this before."'

'Yes. That struck me too. Almost as if he was trying too hard to tie it to the other letters.'

Ruth looks at the words, *Point a line to Lucy and to Scarlet*. She remembers last night tracing the path on the map from the Spenwell bones to the marsh bones to the henge circle. She shivers. It is almost as if the writer was at her shoulder, watching her as she drew the line that led to Scarlet. And the bones. *Do not forget the bones*. There is a lot about bones in this letter. Bones are her speciality. Is the writer sending her a message?

'The nearer the bone, the sweeter the flesh,' she reads aloud. 'That's horrible, like cannibalism.'

'It's a proverb,' says Nelson, 'I looked it up.'

'So, do you still think Cathbad did it?'

Nelson sighs, running his hands through his hair so that it stands up like a crest. 'I don't know, but I haven't got enough to charge him. No DNA, no motive, no confession. We've been over his caravan with a toothcomb, found nothing. I'll keep him until I get the forensics report. If I find a trace of his DNA on Scarlet then he's finished.'

Ruth looks at Nelson. Maybe it's the rumpled hair and the dishevelled clothes but he looks younger somehow, almost vulnerable.

'But you don't think he did it, do you?'

Nelson looks at her. 'No, I don't,' he says.

'Then who did?'

'I don't know.' Nelson lets out another sigh that is almost a groan. 'That's the terrible, shaming thing. All those hours of investigation, all that police time, all that searching and

questioning and I've still got no bloody idea who killed those two little girls. No wonder the media are shouting for my head.'

'I got a call from *The Chronicle* this evening.'

'Bastards! How did they know about you? I've been so careful to keep your name out of it.'

'Well, they were bound to find out sometime.'

Who could have told them though, Ruth thinks. Erik? Shona? Peter?

'They'll make life hard for you,' warns Nelson. 'Is there anywhere you could go for a few days?'

'I could stay with my friend Shona.' Even as she says it, Ruth dreads the long cosy evenings of Shona trying to worm out information. She'll just have to work late most nights.

'Good. I've sent my wife and kids away to my mum. Just until the worst is over.'

'When *will* the worst be over?'

'I don't know.' Nelson looks at her again, his dark eyes troubled. She can hear the rain and the wind outside but somehow it seems a long way away, as if this room, this tiny circle of light, is all that is left in the world.

Nelson is still looking at her. 'I don't want to go home,' he says at last.

And Ruth reaches out to lay her hand on his. 'You don't have to,' she says.

*

The silence wakes Ruth. The wind and the rain have stopped and the night is still. She thinks she hears an owl hooting and, very far off, the faint sigh of the waves.

The moon shines serenely through the open curtains and illuminates the crumpled bed, the strewn clothes and the sleeping figure of DCI Harry Nelson, breathing heavily, one arm flung out across Ruth's breasts. Gently Ruth lifts the arm and gets up to put on some pyjamas. She can't believe she went to bed naked. Somehow that is even harder to believe than the fact that she went to bed with Nelson. That she laid her hand on his, that she, seconds later, reached over to touch her lips with his. She remembers his slight hesitation, a whisper of indrawn breath, before his hand reached up behind her head and he pulled her to

him. They had clung to each other, kissing desperately, hungrily, as the rain battered against the windows. She remembers the roughness of his skin, the surprising softness of his lips, the feel of his body against hers.

How could this have happened? She hardly knows Harry Nelson. Two months ago she had thought him just another boorish policeman. All she does know is that last night they seemed to share something that set them apart from all the world. They had seen Scarlet's body as it rose, lifeless, from the sand. They had, in some small way, shared her family's pain. They had read the letters. They knew of the evil presence out there in the dark. They knew of Lucy Downey too, feared that the next discovery would be her body. And, at that moment, it had seemed only natural that this knowledge should draw them into each other's arms, that they should blot out the pain with the comforts of the body. They might never do it again but last night ... last night had been right.

Even so, thinks Ruth, pulling on her nicest pyjamas (she isn't about to let him see the grey ones with built-in feet), he'd better leave soon. The press knows about her. The last thing either of them wants is for the media to discover the leading policeman in the Scarlet Henderson case in bed with the bones expert. She looks down at Nelson. In sleep he looks much younger, his dark eyelashes fanned out on his cheek, his harsh mouth gentle. Ruth shivers but not from the cold.

'Nelson?' she shakes him.

He is awake immediately.

'What is it?'

'You'd better go.'

He moans. 'What time is it?'

'Almost four.'

He looks at her for a moment as if wondering who she is and then smiles. The surprisingly sweet smile that she has only seen once or twice before.

'Good morning Doctor Galloway.'

'Good morning DI Nelson,' says Ruth, 'you'd better get dressed.'

As Nelson reaches for his clothes, Ruth sees a tattoo high on his shoulder, blue writing around some kind of shield.

'What does your tattoo say?' she asks.

'Seasiders. It's a nickname for my team, Blackpool. Had it done

when I was sixteen. Michelle hates it.'

There, he has said her name. Michelle, the perfect wife, who hovered between them all last night, is suddenly there in the room. Nelson, pulling on his trousers, seems unconscious of what he has said. Perhaps he does this all the time, thinks Ruth.

Dressed, he looks a different person. A policeman, a stranger. He comes over to her, sits on the bed and takes her hand.

'Thanks,' he says.

'What for?'

'Being there.'

'Just doing my duty as a citizen.'

He grins. 'You should get a medal.'

Ruth watches as he retrieves his mobile from under the bed. She feels oddly detached, as if she is watching something on television. But she doesn't really watch that sort of programme; she prefers documentaries.

'Will you go to your friend's house?' asks Nelson, shrugging on his jacket.

'Yes. I think so.'

'Well, keep in touch. Any trouble from those press bastards, give me a shout.'

'I will.'

At the doorway he turns and smiles. 'Goodbye Doctor Galloway,' he says.

And he is gone.

CHAPTER 17

Unable to get back to sleep, Ruth gets up and showers. Watching the water running off her body, she thinks of Nelson and wonders if she is symbolically cleansing herself, rubbing off any taint of his touch, his smell, his presence. That's certainly what her parents would want her to do. Be baptised, be born again. A phrase from her churchgoing past comes into her mind: washed in the blood of the lamb. She shivers. It sounds too much like the letter writer for her liking. She thinks of that last letter with its references to bones and flesh. Were those references meant for her?

She dries herself briskly and goes into her bedroom. She strips the bed (more symbolic cleansing?) and dresses quickly in trousers and fleece. Then she gets out a bag and starts to pack some clothes. She will take Nelson's advice and go to Shona's for a few days. She'll call Shona from the university.

Packing her unaesthetic grey pyjamas, she thinks of Nelson. Did he sleep with her only to blot out the horror of finding Scarlet's body? He can't possibly fancy her, not with Miss Blonde Housewife 2008 waiting for him at home. Does she fancy him? If she is honest, yes. She has been attracted to him ever since she saw him in the corridor that first time, looking too big and too grown up for his surroundings. He is an antidote to the weedy academic types around her, men like Phil and Peter, even Erik. Nelson would never sit and pore over dusty reference books; his preference is for doing things: striding over the marshes, questioning suspects, driving too fast. Sleeping with women who aren't his wife? Well, maybe. She senses it isn't the first time he has been unfaithful to the sainted Michelle. There was something practised about his demeanour this morning, gathering up his clothes, carefully not making any promises about when they would meet next. But there had been emotion too last night, something almost shy, and surprisingly tender. She remembers his sharp intake of breath when she first kissed him, the way he had murmured her name, the way he had kissed her, softly at first and then much harder, almost violently, his body pressed against hers.

Stop thinking about it, she tells herself as she lugs the bag downstairs. It was a one-off. It will never happen again. How can it? He is married, they have almost nothing in common. It was only the circumstances of last night that conjured up that particular spell. From now on they will just be policeman and expert witness, two professionals working together.

Flint purrs around her ankles and Ruth wonders what to do about him. She can't take him to Shona's. The change would upset him, especially coming so soon after Sparky's disappearance. She'll have to ask David to feed him. She remembers him saying once that he didn't like cats because they kill birds but surely he wouldn't mind just for a couple of days? Anyway, with the weekenders back in London there is no-one else to ask.

It is still only six o'clock. She makes herself coffee and toast (her first meal for twenty-four hours, she'll be a size 12 before she knows it) and sits at the table to watch the sun come up. The sky is still dark but there is a faint line of gold against the horizon. The tide is out and the early morning mist lies low over the marsh. This time yesterday, she and Nelson were just setting out across the mudflats.

At seven, she goes to call on David. She is sure he gets up early, for the dawn chorus or something. It is light now and the day is cold and clear, the sky washed clean by yesterday's rain. There will be nothing to stop the journalists today. Nelson is right; she must get away.

David takes a long time to open the door but when he does he is, thankfully, fully dressed. He is wearing waterproofs and looks like he has already been outside.

'I'm sorry to call so early,' says Ruth, 'but I've got to go away for a few days. Could you possibly feed Flint, my cat?'

David looks bemused. 'Flint?' he repeats.

'My cat. Could you come in and feed him for a few days? I'd be really grateful.'

David seems to be registering her for the first time. 'Ruth,' he says. 'Were you involved in all that drama yesterday?'

Drama. The word seems wrong for what happened yesterday on the Saltmarsh. While the day had felt many things, it had never felt unreal. 'Yes,' says Ruth shortly, 'I found the body.'

'My God!' David looks really shocked. 'How awful. I can see

why you'd want to get away.'

'The press were after me yesterday. I want to lie low for a bit.'

'The press.' David's face darkens. 'Vermin. Did you see them yesterday? Trampling over the reed beds, dropping litter and cigarette butts everywhere. Will they be back today, do you think?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I'd better be on patrol.' David looks grim. Ruth thinks it might be time to remind him about Flint. She proffers her key.

'So, is it alright about the cat? His food's in the kitchen. He has one small tin every day and some biscuits. Don't let him persuade you he should have more. Otherwise, he'll just come and go. He's got a cat flap. I'll leave my contact details on the table.'

David takes the key. 'Food. Cat flap. Contact details. Fine. Yes. OK.'

Ruth hopes that he will remember.

The roads are clear and she gets to the university in record time. The car parks are empty. It seems that journalists, like academics, are not early risers. She punches in the code to open the doors and escapes to her office with a sigh of relief. Here, at least, she can be safe for a while.

Three cups of coffee and several pages of lecture notes later, there is a knock at the door.

'Come in,' says Ruth. She assumes it will be Phil, coming for his dose of vicarious excitement.

But it's Shona. Ruth is surprised, Shona hardly ever ventures over from the Arts Faculty.

'Ruth!' Shona comes over to give her a hug. 'I've just heard about yesterday. You actually found that poor little girl's body.'

'Who told you?' asks Ruth.

'Erik. I saw him in the car park.'

It will be all over campus, thinks Ruth. She realises she was stupid to imagine that she could be safe, even here.

'Yes, I found her. She was buried in the peat, right in the centre of the henge circle.'

'My God.' Shona had been on the dig ten years ago, she would know the significance of the place, the sacred ground.

'Does Erik know where she was found?' asks Shona, sitting down.

'Yes. I think he's more upset about that than anything. The

police digging up the site. Contaminating the context.' Ruth surprises herself with the bitterness in her voice.

'Why are they still digging?'

'Well, they think the other girl may be buried there. Lucy Downey.'

'The one who disappeared all that time ago?'

'Ten years ago. Just after the henge dig.'

'Do the police think they were killed by the same person?'

Ruth looks at Shona. Her face is soft, concerned, but Ruth also catches a trace of the slightly shamefaced curiosity that she recognises all too well. In herself.

'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know what the police think.'

'Are they going to charge that druid chap?'

'Cathbad? I'm sorry, Shona, I just don't know.'

'Erik says he's innocent.'

'Yes,' agrees Ruth. She wonders how much Erik has told Shona.

'What do *you* think?' persists Shona.

'I don't know,' says Ruth for what feels like the hundredth time. 'It's hard to think of him as a murderer. He always seemed a harmless old thing, into peace and nature and all that. But the police must have some evidence otherwise they wouldn't be able to hold him.'

'That Detective Nelson sounds a real hard bastard.'

Briefly Ruth thinks of Nelson. Sees, as if projected in technicolour onto the wall opposite, his face above hers. Feels his stubble against her cheek.

'I really don't know him that well,' she says. 'Look Shona, I've got a favour to ask you. Can I stay with you for a few days? You see, the press have got wind that I was involved. I think they might come round to my house and I'd just like to get away for a bit.'

'Of course,' says Shona at once. 'You're more than welcome. Tell you what, we'll have a takeaway and a few bottles tonight. Have a real girls' night in. Forget about everything and just unwind. What do you think?'

*

She doesn't quite know why but Ruth doesn't enjoy her girls' night in as much as she expected. For a start she is exhausted and

after a few glasses of Pinot Grigio she feels her eyelids begin to droop. Then, for perhaps the first time in her adult life, she just isn't that hungry. Usually she loves takeaways: the flimsy silver cartons, the gloriously greasy food, the mystery dish that you're never sure whether you ordered. Usually, she loves it all. But, tonight, after a few mouthfuls of crispy aromatic duck, she pushes away her plate. The smell of soy sauce is starting to make her feel sick.

'What's up?' asks Shona, her mouth full. 'Dig in. There's loads.'

'I'm sorry,' says Ruth, 'I'm not very hungry.'

'You have to eat,' intones Shona, as if Ruth were an anorexic schoolgirl rather than an overweight woman in her late thirties. 'At least have another drink.' She sloshes more wine into Ruth's glass. 'Come on, chill out.'

Shona lives in a terraced house on the outskirts of King's Lynn. It is near the centre of town, all very urban, the perfect antidote to the Saltmarsh. And at first Ruth had just stood in the tiny front garden listening to the traffic and breathing in the pungent aroma of garlic and cumin from the nearby Indian takeaway. 'Come in,' Shona said. 'Stay outside too long and you'll get clamped. Christ, the parking round here.'

Ruth had come in and installed herself in Shona's spare room (polished floor, pine bed, Egyptian cotton sheets, prints of Paris and New York). Now I can relax, she told herself. No-one knows where I am. I can calm down, have a nice meal and a few glasses of wine. I'll be a new person tomorrow.

But it hasn't quite worked out like that. She feels twitchy, ill-at-ease. She keeps checking her phone though she isn't expecting anyone to call. She worries that David will forget to feed Flint. She misses her cottage and the desolate, doomed view over the Saltmarsh. She feels almost sick with tiredness but she knows she won't be able to sleep tonight. As soon as she shuts her eyes the whole thing will play again, like some X-rated movie on a continuous loop: the early-morning trek over the mudflats, the discovery of Scarlet's body, the little arm hanging down, Nelson at her door, red-eyed and unshaven, Nelson's body moving against hers ...

Everything reminds her. Shona's ambient music playing softly in the background reminds her of the rain and the voices of the birds, suddenly stilled. The soft candlelight makes her think of

the will o'the wisps with their treacherous flickering lights, leading unwary travellers to their deaths. When she looks at Shona's bookshelves and sees T.S. Eliot nestling next to Shakespeare she thinks of the Lucy Downey letters. *We who were living are now dying.*

'So do you think he will?' asks Shona, pouring more wine into Ruth's glass.

'What?' Ruth has completely lost track of the conversation.

'Leave Anne. Do you think Liam will leave Anne?'

Not in a million years, thinks Ruth. Just as Nelson will never leave Michelle.

'Maybe. I don't know. Are you sure you want him to?'

'I don't know. If you'd asked me six months ago I would have said yes, but now? I think I would be terrified, to be honest. There's something safe about going out with a married man.'

'Is there?'

'Yes, you always think, if it wasn't for his wife, he'd be with me. You don't have to face up to anything else that might be wrong with the relationship. And it stays exciting. You don't have a chance to get bored.'

'Have you done this before then?' As far as Ruth knows, Liam is Shona's first married lover but she is talking like a veteran of extra-marital affairs. Like Nelson, she thinks cynically.

Shona's face suddenly takes on a closed, watchful expression. She fills up her own glass, splashing wine onto the trendy rush-matting rug.

'Oh, once or twice,' she says, with what sounds like deliberate casualness. 'Before I met you. Now, for heaven's sake drink up Ruth. You're way behind.'

*

Ruth was right about not being able to sleep. She tries to immerse herself in Rebus but Rebus and Siobhan become, embarrassingly and explicitly, herself and Nelson. She even opens her laptop and starts to work but, although way behind Shona, she has drunk too much to be interested in Mesolithic burial sites. Tombs, burials, bodies, bones, she thinks blurrily, why is archaeology so concerned with death?

She drinks some water, turns over her pillow and determinedly

shuts her eyes. A hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, how many flint mines in Norfolk, hope David remembers Flint, hope Flint doesn't kill any rare marsh birds ... Sparky's body in its flimsy cardboard coffin ... Scarlet's arm hanging down below the tarpaulin ... ninety-six, ninety-five ... *We who were living are now dying* ... ninety-four, ninety-three ... he'll never leave his wife ... why has Peter come back, why can't Shona forget about Liam, does Cathbad still love Delilah, why are the Iron Age bodies in a line, why did the line point to Scarlet ... ninety-two, ninety-one ...

The bleeping of her phone is a welcome relief. She snatches it up gratefully. A text message. The little screen gleams green in the dark. Caller unknown.

I know where you are.

The sky is full of noises. Thumping noises, crackling noises like very large birds hooting and calling. She knows it is daytime because the window is closed. She can't see anything, only hear the noises. She is scared and huddles in the corner of the room, under the blanket.

For a long time He doesn't come and she is hungry and more scared than ever. She finishes her water and looks in the dark for the piece of bread she thinks she dropped a few days ago. She wonders if she will die if he doesn't come to feed her. Maybe he is dead.

He doesn't come for a long time and her mouth is dry and the bucket in the corner starts to smell.

She edges her way around the room, looking for the bread. She can see lights through the sides of the trapdoor and she wants to call out but is afraid to. The stone walls are damp and mossy, smooth when she runs her hands over them. She can reach higher now, almost to the dry bits at the top where the stones are all crumbly like breadcrumbs. Why can she reach higher? Is she getting bigger? He says so. Too big, he says. What does that mean? Too big for what?

She reaches as high as she can and pulls at one of the stones. It comes away in her hands, surprising her, making her fall backwards. She sits on the floor and feels the edge of the stone with her thumb. It is sharp, it cuts her. She licks the blood; it tastes like the metal cup she drinks from but it's also salty, odd-tasting, strong. She licks until the blood has gone.

She takes the stone to the corner of the room where there is soil, not floor. She digs a hole and, very carefully, she places the stone in the

hole and covers it with earth. Then she stamps on the soil until it is all smooth again and no-one but her would know that something is buried there.

It is the first time she has had a secret. It tastes good.

CHAPTER 18

Exhaustion finally sends Ruth to sleep at two a.m. For several hours she had just sat there, listening to her heart pounding and looking at the text message. Those few chilling words. Who could have sent it? Is it Him, the letter writer, the murderer? Who knows where she is? Who has her mobile phone number? Must it – and her stomach contracts as if she is about to be sick – must it be someone she knows?

She knows that she has to ring Nelson, but somehow, she doesn't want to call him in the middle of the night. Yesterday has blurred all the issues. She doesn't want Nelson to think she is hassling him. What is more important, she asks herself sternly, being murdered in your bed or a man getting the wrong idea about you? She wishes her subconscious was more liberated.

She falls asleep and wakes a few hours later, still upright and stiff all over. Her phone has fallen to the floor and, hand trembling, she picks it up. No new messages. Ruth sighs and burrows down inside the bed. Right now, she is so tired that death seems almost an attractive option, to go to sleep and never wake up.

When she wakes again there is proper, yellow daylight outside the window and Shona is standing by her bed holding a cup of tea.

'You have slept well,' she says brightly. 'It's past nine.'

Ruth sips the tea gratefully. It's ages since someone brought her tea in bed. In daylight, sitting in Shona's sunny, tasteful spare room, she no longer feels destined to die a violent death. She feels, in fact, ready to fight. She gets up, showers, and dresses in her toughest, most uncompromising clothes (black suit, white shirt, scary earrings). Then she goes downstairs ready to kick ass.

She is sitting in her car, ready to drive to work when her phone goes off. Despite her scary earrings, she is absolutely terrified, breathing hard, palms clammy.

'Hi Ruth. It's Nelson.'

'Oh. Nelson. Hello.' For some reason, her heart is still thumping.

'Just wanted you to know, we're releasing Malone tomorrow.'

‘You are? Why?’

‘Forensic reports have come back and there’s none of his DNA on Scarlet. So we’re charging him with writing the letters and that’s all. He’ll come up in court tomorrow and I expect he’ll get bail.’

‘Is he still a suspect?’

Nelson laughs humourlessly. ‘Well, he’s the only one we’ve got, but we’ve got nothing that ties him to the murder. We haven’t got any reason to keep holding him.’

‘What will he do?’

‘Well, he can’t leave the area. I suspect he’ll lie low though. Might even get police protection, what with all the media interest.’ Nelson sounds so scornful that, despite herself, Ruth smiles.

‘What did the ... the post-mortem say?’

‘Death was by asphyxiation. Looks like something was shoved in her mouth and she choked on it. Her hands were tied with some sort of plant plaited together.’

‘Some sort of *plant*?’

‘Yes, looks like honeysuckle and – you’ll like this – mistletoe.’

Ruth thinks of the letters and their mention of mistletoe. Does this mean that the writer was the murderer? Does this mean that it was Cathbad after all? Then she thinks of the ropes that had hauled the henge timbers into place. Honeysuckle rope. As Peter had remembered.

‘Body had been in the ground about six weeks,’ Nelson is saying. ‘Hard to tell because of the peat. No sign of sexual abuse.’

‘That’s something,’ says Ruth hesitantly.

‘Yes,’ says Nelson, his voice bitter. ‘That’s something. And we’ll be able to let the family have the body for burial. That’ll mean a lot to them.’ He sighs. Ruth imagines him scowling as he sits at his desk, looking through files, making lists, deliberately not looking at the photo of Scarlet Henderson.

‘Any road’ – Nelson’s voice changes gear, rather jerkily – ‘How are you? No more calls from the press, I hope.’

‘No, but I had an odd message last night.’ Ruth tells him about the text message. She imagines Nelson’s eyes shooting heavenwards. How much more trouble is this woman going to cause me?

‘I’ll get someone on to it,’ he says, ‘give me the number.’

She does so. 'Can you trace a mobile phone number?'

'Yes. Mobile phones have a unique number that they send out every time they make a call. It's like they check in to their local base. If we have the number, it won't be hard to trace the call. Of course, if he's clever, he'll have ditched the phone.'

'Do you think it was ... him?'

'Christ knows. But we need to get you some protection. How long are you staying with your mate?'

'I don't know.' As she says this, Ruth is assailed by a longing for her home. For her bed and her cat and her view over the ill-omened marshes.

'I'll send some men to watch her house and to keep your place under surveillance. Try not to worry too much. I don't think he'll come out into the open. He's too clever.'

'Is he?'

'Well, he's been too clever for me, hasn't he?'

'You'll catch him,' says Ruth with more conviction than she feels.

'Wish the press agreed with you. Take care, love.'

As she clicks off her phone, Ruth thinks: *love?*

*

At the university, the first person she sees is Peter. He's waiting outside her room and the memory comes back, unbidden, of seeing Nelson in the same place, so harsh and unyielding next to the conciliatory Phil. Unlike Nelson on that occasion, who had shown all the swagger of a professional coming into a room full of amateurs, Peter looks nervous, flattening himself apologetically against the wall every time a student goes past (which, as it is still early, is not very often).

'Ruth!' He steps forward to greet her.

'Peter. What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to see you.'

Ruth sighs inwardly. The last thing she needs this morning is Peter going on about his marriage and wanting to relive the henge dig.

'You'd better come in,' she says ungraciously.

In her office, Peter swoops on her cat doorstep. 'I remember buying you this. I can't believe you've still got it.'

‘It’s useful,’ says Ruth shortly. She’s not about to tell him that she has kept it for sentimental reasons, which wouldn’t be true. Well, not entirely true.

Peter sinks down in her visitor’s chair. ‘Great office,’ he says, looking up at Indiana Jones. Ten years ago, she hadn’t been important enough for an office of her own.

‘Bit small,’ she says.

‘You should see my office at UCL. I have to share it with an archivist with a personal freshness problem. I only get the desk Mondays and Thursdays.’

Ruth laughs. Peter could always make her laugh, she thinks grudgingly.

Peter smiles too, looking fleetingly like his old self, but then his face looks grave again.

‘What a terrible business on the Saltmarsh,’ he says, ‘you finding that little girl’s body.’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you know she was there?’

Ruth looks up sharply. This seems an odd question. Who was to say that it wasn’t the police who discovered the location?

‘It was a hunch,’ she said at last. ‘I was looking at the map and I saw a line leading from the Spenwell body to my Iron Age body to the henge. The posts that I showed you, the causeway, they seemed to mark the route. I thought of cursuses, underground paths that seem to point to significant things in the landscape. I suddenly realised that the causeway was a cursus.’

‘And it led to the body?’

‘Yes.’

‘But are you saying it was deliberate? That someone buried her there knowing all about causeways and cursuses?’

‘Cursuses. I don’t know. The police think that maybe the murderer knows about archaeology.’

‘Do they?’ Peter is silent for a few seconds, obviously considering this. Then he looks up and says, ‘That reminds me, Erik’s set up a dig next week to look at the causeway.’

‘Has he got police permission?’

‘Apparently so. He spoke to your mate Nelson. He says it’s OK as long as they don’t go into the henge circle. And, obviously, they’ve got to show the police anything they find.’

Erik has spoken to Nelson, whom apparently he dislikes and

distrusts. Nelson has given permission for the dig. Ruth's head swims in a miasma of contradictions, loyalties, memories.

'When did you see Erik?' she asks at last.

'Yesterday. We had lunch together.'

'Did you?' Ruth tries to imagine the scene. Erik always liked Peter, seemed to approve of him as a partner for Ruth, but she can't quite imagine them sitting down for a cosy pizza together.

'Where did you go?'

'Oh, some sushi place he knows.'

So, no pizza then. 'Did he say anything about Cathbad? Michael Malone?'

'Only that the police had got the wrong man. He seemed quite heated about it. Kept going on about a police state, you know what an old hippie he is.'

Yet Erik was quite prepared to go to Nelson for permission to dig, thinks Ruth. Nothing, *nothing*, comes in the way of the archaeology.

'They're releasing Cathbad,' says Ruth. 'It'll probably be on the news today.' Well, Nelson didn't tell her to keep it a secret.

'Really?' says Peter with interest. 'Releasing him without charge?'

'There may be some charges, I don't know.'

'Come off it, Ruth, you seem to know everything.'

'I don't,' snaps Ruth, unreasonably irritated.

'Sorry.' Peter looks contrite. It doesn't suit him. 'So,' he asks brightly, 'how's Shona?'

'Fine. The same. Going on about how she's going to give up men and become a nun.'

'Who is it this time?'

'A lecturer. Married.'

'Is he promising to leave his wife?'

'Naturally.'

Peter sighs. 'Poor old Shona.' Perhaps he is thinking about his own marriage because he seems to slump in his chair, even his hair seems muted. 'I always thought she'd get married and have ten children. The old Catholic upbringing coming out.'

Ruth thinks of Shona's two abortions; the defiant declarations of independence before, the endless tears afterwards. 'No,' she says, 'no children.'

'Poor Shona,' says Peter again. He sinks even further into his

chair. It's going to take a rocket to shift him.

'Peter,' says Ruth, lighting the touch paper, 'did you want something? I ought to be getting on.'

He looks hurt. 'Just to see how you were. I wondered if you'd like to go out for a drink tonight?'

Ruth thinks of going back to another girl's night in: Pinot Grigio, Liam, takeaway, mysterious text messages.

'Ok,' she says. 'That'd be nice.'

*

They go to a restaurant in King's Lynn, near the pub where Ruth had lunch with Nelson. This place, though, has pretensions: lower-case menu, blonde wood floors, square plates, banks of flickering candles. Chasing a lone scallop over acres of white china, Ruth says, 'Where did you find this place?' Then she adds hastily, 'It's great.'

'Phil recommended it.' That figured.

It's early and there are only two other couples dining, two thirtysomethings who are clearly counting the minutes until they can be in bed together and an elderly couple who do not exchange one word all evening.

'Blimey, why don't they get a room?' mutters Ruth as the thirtysomething woman starts licking wine off the man's fingers.

'Probably married to other people.'

'Why do you say that?'

'If they were married to each other, they wouldn't be talking, let alone be performing sex acts on each other's fingers,' says Peter in a low voice. 'Look at the old dears over there. Fifty years of wedded bliss and not a word to say to each other.'

Ruth wants to ask if this was what his marriage was like. Say nothing, she tells herself, and he'll come out with it. Peter was never very good at silences.

Sure enough, Peter sighs and takes a gulp of over-priced red wine. 'Like me and Victoria. We just ... drifted apart. I know it's a cliché but it's true. We just ran out of things to say to each other. Woke up one morning and discovered that, apart from Daniel, we had nothing in common. Oh we still like each other, it's all very friendly, but that something, that vital something, has gone.'

But that's what happened to us, Ruth wants to say. She

remembers that feeling of looking at Peter – intelligent, kind, good-looking Peter – and thinking, ‘Is this it?’ Is this what I have to settle for, a nice man who, when he touches me, I sometimes don’t even notice?

But Peter has his rose-tinted spectacles on again. ‘With us, we had so much in common,’ he says dreamily, ‘archaeology, history, books. Victoria’s no intellectual. Her only serious reading matter is *Hello* magazine.’

‘That’s very patronising,’ says Ruth.

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong,’ says Peter hastily, ‘Victoria’s a wonderful woman. Very warm and giving.’ (She’s put on weight, thinks Ruth). ‘I’m very fond of her and we’re both devoted to Daniel but it’s not a marriage any more. We’re more like flatmates, sharing childcare and housework, only talking about who’s picking up Daniel the next day or when the Tesco delivery is coming.’

‘Well, what did you expect to be talking about? Renaissance architecture? The early poems of Robert Browning?’

Peter grins. ‘Something like that. Well, we talked, didn’t we? Do you remember the nights around the campfire talking about whether Neolithic man was a hunter-gatherer or a farmer? You said that women would have done the hunting and you tried to creep up on that sheep to show how it could be done.’

‘And fell flat on my face in sheep crap,’ says Ruth drily. She leans forward. It seems very important to make this clear to Peter. ‘Look Peter, the henge dig was ten years ago. That was then. This is now. We’re different people. We had a relationship and that was great but it’s in the past. You can’t go back.’

‘Can’t you?’ asks Peter, looking at her very intently. In the candlelight his eyes are very dark, almost black.

‘No,’ says Ruth gently.

Peter stares at her in silence for a minute or two, then he smiles. A different smile, sweeter and much sadder. ‘Well, let’s just get pissed then,’ he says, leaning forward to fill up her glass.

*

She doesn’t get pissed but she’s probably slightly over the limit when she gets into her car.

‘Drive carefully,’ says Peter as he heads towards a new-looking

Alfa Romeo. Mid-life crisis?

‘I will.’ Ruth is glad that she doesn’t have to negotiate the treacherous New Road with the darkness of the marsh all around. It’s only a few minutes’ drive to Shona’s, she should be alright. She drives slowly, following other, more decisive, cars. On the radio, someone is talking about Gordon Brown. ‘He wants to go back to the way things were.’ Don’t we all, thinks Ruth, taking a left turn into Shona’s road. Despite her tough words, she sympathises with Peter and his yearning for the past. There is something very tempting about the idea of going back to Peter, accepting that the mysterious perfect man is not going to turn up, that Peter is the best that she is going to get, probably a lot better than she deserves. What’s stopping her? Is it the shadowy Victoria and Daniel? Is it Nelson? She knows that nothing will come of the night with Nelson – it is just that imagining herself in bed with Peter seems comforting and familiar; it does not, for one minute, seem exciting.

She finds a space by the Indian restaurant and starts to walk towards Shona’s house. Out of reflex, she checks her text messages. Just one:

I know where you are.

CHAPTER 19

Scarlet Henderson's funeral takes place on a grim, rainy Friday afternoon. A line from a folk hymn comes into Ruth's head: 'I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black.' The heavens are certainly weeping for Scarlet Henderson today; the rain falls relentlessly all morning.

'It's bad luck to have a funeral on a Friday,' says Shona, looking out of her sitting-room window at the water cascading down the street.

'For Christ's sake,' explodes Ruth. 'When is it good luck to have a funeral?'

She shouldn't have snapped at Shona. She's only trying to be supportive, has even offered to come to the funeral with her, but Ruth says she should go alone. She feels somehow that she owes it to Scarlet, the little girl she knows only in death. Owes it too to Delilah and Alan. And to Nelson? Maybe. She hasn't spoken to him in days. Cathbad's release was on every newscast with Nelson, stony-faced, claiming to be following up new leads. Ruth suspects this is a lie, a suspicion shared, apparently, by most of the press.

The church, a squat modern building on the outskirts of Spenwell, is packed. Ruth finds a space at the back, wedged into the end of a pew. She can just see Nelson at the front of the church. He is wearing a dark grey suit and looking straight in front of him. He is flanked by other burly figures who she thinks must be policemen. There is a policewoman too. Ruth sees her searching in her bag for a tissue and wonders if this is Judy, who helped break the news to Scarlet's parents.

The arrival of the tiny coffin, accompanied by a shell-shocked Delilah and Alan, the chrysanthemums spelling out the name 'Scarlet', the siblings, cowed and wide-eyed in their dark clothes, the reedy singing of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' – all seem designed to break your heart. Ruth feels the tears prickling at the back of her eyes but she does not let them fall. What right has she to cry over Scarlet?

The vicar, a nervous-looking man in white robes, makes a few anodyne remarks about angels and innocence and God's right

hand. Then, to Ruth's surprise, Nelson steps forward to do a reading. He reads very badly, stumbling over the words, eyes downcast.

"I am the resurrection and the life", says the Lord. "Those that believe in me even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Ruth is reminded uncomfortably of the letters. The writer of the Lucy Downey letters would love this, all his old favourites are here: life, death, the certainty of the afterlife and a comforting pall of mysticism thrown over the whole. Did Cathbad write those letters? And, if so, why? To frustrate the police? She knows that Cathbad dislikes the police – and archaeologists too, for that matter – but is that enough of a reason? Where is Cathbad today? Did he want to come, to comfort the woman he once loved, to comfort his daughter, Delilah's eldest, now weeping silently into her mother's hair?

At last it's over and the little white coffin passes so close that Ruth could almost touch it. She sees, again, that image of the arm hanging down, almost imagines that she can see it reaching out of the coffin, asking for her help. She shuts her eyes and the vision fades. The last hymn is playing, people are getting to their feet.

Outside, the rain has stopped and the air is cold and clammy. The coffin, followed by Scarlet's family, is driven away for a private cremation. The remaining mourners seem visibly to relax: talking, putting on coats, a couple of people lighting cigarettes.

Ruth finds herself next to the policewoman, who has a sweet, freckled face and eyes swollen with tears.

Ruth introduces herself and the policewoman's face lights up with recognition. 'Oh, I know about you. The boss has talked about you. I'm Judy Johnson, Detective Constable Judy Johnson.'

'You're the one who—' Ruth stops, not knowing if she should go on.

'Who broke the news. Yes. I've had the training, you see, and they like a woman to go, especially if there's a child involved.'

'Nelson ... DCI Nelson, said you were very good.'

'That's kind of him but I'm not sure how much anyone could do.'

They are silent for a moment, looking at the undertaker's cars lining the road outside. Nelson is getting into one of the cars. He doesn't look round.

‘See those people over there?’ Judy indicates a grey-haired couple walking slowly away from the church. ‘They’re Lucy Downey’s parents. You know the Lucy Downey case?’

‘I’ve heard of it, yes. How do they know the Hendersons?’

‘When Scarlet went missing, Mrs Downey contacted Delilah Henderson to offer support. They’re lovely people. Makes it even worse somehow.’

Ruth watches the lovely people as they walk past the rain-sleek cars. The woman, Lucy Downey’s mother, looks old, grey-haired and round-shouldered. Her husband is more robust, he has his arm around her as if he is used to protecting her. How must they feel, attending this funeral when they have never been able to say goodbye to their own daughter? Do they, in some corner of their hearts, still think she is alive?

‘Can I give you a lift home?’ asks Judy.

Ruth looks at her, thinking of the drive back to Shona’s house; Shona’s solicitude, lightly tinged with curiosity, the night in the tasteful spare room.

‘No thank you,’ she says. ‘I’ve got my car. I’m going straight home.’

And she does. She drives straight back to the New Road. She knows she will have to go back to Shona’s house to pick up her clothes but, at this moment, all she wants to do is go home. The marshes are grey and dreary under the lowering skies but Ruth is still unaccountably glad to be back. She parks in her usual spot beside the broken fence and lets herself in, shouting joyfully for Flint. He must have been waiting for her because he comes running in from the kitchen, looking ruffled and hard done by. Ruth picks him up, breathing in the lovely, outdoor smell of his fur.

The house is as she left it. David has obviously collected her post and put it in a neat pile. Flint seems fine so he must have remembered to feed him. The empty bottle of white wine is still on the table next to Nelson’s abandoned coffee mug. The sofa cushions are on the floor. Blushing, Ruth picks them up and bashes them back into shape.

The post is mostly boring: bills, overdue library books, a flyer from a local theatre where Ruth went to see a play six years ago, charity appeals, a postcard from a friend in New York. Ruth leaves most of it unopened and goes into the kitchen to make a

cup of tea. Flint jumps onto the work surface and meows loudly. He must have been getting into bad habits. Ruth puts him back on the floor whereupon he immediately jumps up again.

‘Stupid cat. What are you playing at?’

‘Cats aren’t stupid,’ says a voice behind her. ‘They have highly developed mystical powers.’

Ruth starts and swings round. A man wearing a muddy cloak over jeans and an army jacket stands smiling, quite at ease, at her kitchen door.

Cathbad.

Ruth backs away. ‘How did you get in?’ she asks.

‘I came in when that man came to feed the cat. He didn’t see me. I can make myself invisible, didn’t you know? I’ve been watching the house for a while. I knew you’d be back. This place has got quite a hold over you, hasn’t it?’

The statement is disturbing on so many levels that, for a moment, Ruth can only stand and stare. Cathbad has been watching her house. He guesses, quite rightly, that the Saltmarsh has a hold over her. What else does he know?

‘What are you doing here?’ she says at last, trying to make her voice steady.

‘I wanted to talk to you. Have you got any herbal teas?’ He gestures towards her mug. ‘Caffeine’s a poison.’

‘I’m not making you a cup of tea.’ Ruth hears her voice rising. ‘I want you to get out of my house.’

‘It’s natural for you to be upset,’ says Cathbad kindly. ‘Have you been to the funeral? Poor little girl. Poor, undeveloped soul. I’ve been sitting here sending positive thoughts to Delilah.’

‘I’m sure she was very grateful.’

‘Don’t be angry, Ruth,’ says Cathbad with a surprisingly sweet smile. ‘We’ve got no quarrel after all. Erik says you’ve got a good heart.’

‘Very kind of him.’

‘He says you understand about the Saltmarsh, about the henge. It wasn’t your fault the barbarians destroyed it. I remember you that summer, hand in hand with your boyfriend. It was a magical time for you, wasn’t it?’

Ruth lowers her eyes. ‘Yes,’ she admits.

‘It was for me, too. It was the first time I’d felt really at one with nature. Knowing that the ancients built that circle for a

reason. Feeling the magic still there after all those centuries and being able to experience it, just for a short time, before it was gone forever.'

Ruth remembers something that always annoyed her about the druids, even in the old days. They felt that the henge was theirs alone, that they were the only heirs of its creators. We are all descended from them, Ruth wanted to say, it belongs to all of us. She still has no idea what Cathbad is doing here.

'What do you want?' she says.

'To talk to you,' says Cathbad again. He stoops and picks up Flint, who disgusts Ruth by purring loudly. 'This is a very wise cat,' he announces, 'an old soul.'

'He's not that bright,' says Ruth. 'My other cat was cleverer.'

'Yes. I'm sorry about what happened to her.'

'How did you know?' asks Ruth. 'How did you know about my other cat?'

'Erik told me. Why? Did you think I did it?'

Ruth doesn't know what to think. Is she trapped in the kitchen with a cat killer, or worse, a child murderer? She looks at Cathbad as he stands there, holding Flint in his arms. His face is open, slightly hurt-looking. He doesn't look like a killer but then what does a killer look like?

'I don't know what to think,' she says. 'The police have charged you with writing those letters.'

Immediately, Cathbad's face darkens. 'The police! That bastard Nelson has it in for me. I'm going to sue him for wrongful arrest.'

'Did you write them?'

Cathbad smiles and puts Flint gently back on the floor. 'I think you know I didn't,' he says. 'You've read them, after all.'

'How did you...?'

'Nelson's not as clever as he thinks he is. He gave it away. Yakking on about archaeology terms. There's only one person who could have told him all that. You're very friendly, you two, aren't you? There's definite energy between you.'

Ruth says nothing. Cathbad may not, as Erik claims, be magic but there is no denying that some of his shots hit the mark.

'I know you, Ruth,' says Cathbad chattily, hitching himself up to sit on the work surface. 'I watched you fall in love with that red-haired fellow all those years ago. I know what you're like when you're in love. You were in love with Erik too, weren't

you?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Oh yes you were. I felt sorry for you because you didn’t get a look-in, what with his wife and girlfriend both on the dig.’

‘Girlfriend? What do you mean?’

‘That beautiful girl with all the hair. Looks like a Renaissance picture. *Primavera* or something. Teaches at the university. She was sympathetic to us, I remember. Joined in the protests. Well, until it started to get serious.’

‘Shona?’ Ruth whispers. ‘That’s not true.’

‘No?’ Cathbad looks at her, head on one side, while Ruth shuffles quickly through her memories. Shona and Erik always liked each other. Erik called her The Lady of Shalott after the Waterhouse portrait. An image comes to her, clear as a film flashback, of Shona plaiting Erik’s grey ponytail. ‘Like a horse,’ she is saying, ‘a Viking carthorse,’ and her hand rests lightly on his cheek.

Cathbad smiles, satisfied. ‘I need you to clear my name, Ruth,’ he says.

‘I thought the police didn’t press charges.’

‘Oh no, they didn’t charge me with the murders, but if they never find the killer, it’ll always be me, don’t you see? Everyone will always think I did it, that I killed those two little girls.’

‘And did you?’ asks Ruth, greatly daring.

Cathbad’s eyes never leave her face. ‘No,’ he says. ‘And I want you to find out who did.’

He has come back. When she sees him climbing in through the trapdoor she doesn’t know if she is pleased or sorry. She is hungry though. She tears at the food he has brought – crisps, sandwiches, an apple – stuffing another mouthful in her mouth before she has finished the first.

‘Steady,’ he says, ‘you’ll make yourself sick.’

She doesn’t answer. She hardly ever speaks to him. She saves talking for when she is alone, which, after all, is most of the time, when she can chat to the friendly voices in her head, the ones that tell her it is darkest before dawn.

He gives her a drink in a funny orange bottle. It tastes odd but she gulps it down. Briefly she wonders if it is poison like the apple the wicked witch gave Snow White, but she is so thirsty she doesn’t care.

'I'm sorry I couldn't come before,' he says. She ignores him, chewing up the last of the apple, including the pips and core.

'I'm sorry,' he says again. He often says this but she doesn't really know what it means. 'Sorry' is a word from long ago, like 'love' and 'goodnight'. What does it mean now? She isn't sure. One thing she knows, if he says it, it can't be a good word. He isn't good, she is sure of it now. At first she was confused, he brought her food and drink and a blanket at night and sometimes he talked to her. Those were good things, she thought. But now she thinks that he keeps her locked in, which isn't good. After all, if he can climb through the trapdoor, up into the sky, why can't she? Now she is taller she has tried to jump up to the door and the barred window but she never manages it. Maybe one day, if she keeps getting taller and taller, as tall as ... what was it called? As tall as a tree, that's it. She'll push her branches through the hole and carry on, up, up to where she hears the birds singing.

When he has gone she digs up her sharp stone and runs the edge of it against her cheek.

CHAPTER 20

Ruth is awoken from confused dreams by a furious knocking at the door. She staggers downstairs, groggy with sleep, to find Erik, dressed in army surplus and a bright yellow sou'wester, standing on the doorstep.

'Good morning, good morning,' he says brightly, like some crazed holiday rep. 'Any chance of a cup of coffee?'

Ruth leans against the door frame. Is he mad or is she? 'Erik,' she says weakly, 'what are you doing here?'

Erik looks at her incredulously. 'The dig,' he says. 'It starts today.'

Of course. Erik's dig. The one approved by Nelson. The dig that aims to answer the riddle of the Iron Age body and the buried causeway. To find out whether the Saltmarsh has any more secrets.

'I didn't know it was today,' says Ruth, backing into the house. Erik follows, rubbing his hands together. He has probably been up for hours. Ruth remembers that one of his traditions on a dig was to see the sun rise on the first day and set on the last.

'Yes,' Erik is saying casually. 'Nelson said it had to be after the funeral and that was yesterday, I believe.'

'It was. I was there.'

'Were you?' Erik looks at her in surprise. 'Why ever did you go?'

'I don't know,' says Ruth, putting on the kettle. 'I felt involved somehow.'

'Well, you aren't involved,' says Erik shortly, removing his sou'wester. 'High time you stopped all this detective nonsense and concentrated on archaeology. That's what you're good at. Very good. One of my very best students, in fact.'

Ruth, who bridles with indignation at the start of this speech, softens somewhat by the end. Even so, she isn't about to let Erik get away with this.

'Archaeologists *are* detectives,' she says. 'That's what you've always said.'

Erik dismisses this with a shrug. 'This is different, Ruthie. You must see that. You've given the police the benefit of your

professional advice. Now leave it at that. There's no need to become obsessed.'

'I'm not obsessed.'

'No?' Erik smiles in an irritating, knowing way that reminds Ruth of Cathbad. Have they been discussing her?

'No,' says Ruth shortly, turning away to pour the coffee. She also puts some bread in the toaster. No way is she going to dig on an empty stomach.

'The poor girl is dead,' says Erik gently, his accent like a lullaby. 'She is buried, she is at peace. Leave it at that.'

Ruth looks at him. Erik is sitting by the window, smiling at her. The sun gleams on his snowy hair. He looks utterly benign.

'I'm going to get dressed,' says Ruth. 'Help yourself to coffee.'

*

The dig is already well underway by the time Ruth arrives. Three trenches have been marked out with string and pegs, one by the original Iron Age body, the other two along the path of the causeway. Archaeologists and volunteers are very gently lifting off the turf in one-inch squares; they will aim to put the grass and soil back at the end of the dig.

Ruth remembers from the henge excavation that digging on this marshy land is a tricky business. The furthest trench, which is beyond the tide mark, will fill with water every night. This means it will, in effect, have to be dug afresh every day. And the tide can take you by surprise. Ruth remembers that Erik always used to have one person on 'tide watch'; sometimes the tide comes in slowly, creeping silently over the flat landscape. At other times the earth becomes water before you have time to catch your breath. These fast tides, called rip tides, could cut you off from land in the blink of an eye.

Even the trenches near to dry land have their problems. Although Erik has already mapped the area, the land can shift overnight, nothing remains certain. Archaeologists tend to become twitchy if they can't rely on their coordinates.

Ruth finds Erik leaning over the furthest trench. Because of the shifting ground, the trench is narrow and reinforced with sandbags. Two men are standing in the trench, looking nervously at Erik. Ruth recognises one of them as Bob Bullmore, the

forensic anthropologist.

Ruth kneels beside Erik, who is examining one of the posts.

‘Are you going to take it out?’ asks Ruth.

Erik shakes his head. ‘No, I want to keep it in place but I’m worried the waves will loosen it if we dig too far down.’

‘Don’t you need to see the base?’

‘Yes, if possible. Look at this wood though. It looks as if it has been sawn in half.’

Ruth looks at the post. The other, softer wood has been worn away by the constant movement of the tides. What’s left is the hard centre of the wood, ragged and somehow menacing-looking.

‘It looks like the same wood that was used for the henge posts,’ says Ruth.

Erik looks at her. ‘Yes, it does. We’ll have to see what the dendrochronology says.’

Tree-dating, or dendrochronology, can be amazingly exact. A tree lays down a growth ring each year, more in wet years, fewer in dry years. By looking at a graph showing growth patterns, archaeologists can chart the growth fluctuations. This process is called ‘wiggle watching’ (Peter always used to find this hilarious). Wiggle watching, combined with radiocarbon dating, can tell you the actual year and the actual season when a tree was felled.

Ruth goes to help with the trench where the Iron Age body was discovered. She still has a fellow feeling with this girl who was fed mistletoe and tied down to die. She sees her as somehow linked to Lucy and Scarlet. She can’t help thinking that if she solves the riddle of the Iron Age girl she might just throw some light on the deaths of the other two girls.

More than anything though it is wonderful to be digging again. Like the day when she helped Nelson fill in Sparky’s grave, it is a relief to forget the heartache and terror and excitement in uncomplicated, physical labour. Ruth settles down to trowelling, getting into a rhythm, ignoring the twinges in her back and concentrating on moving the soil in neat cross-sections. After yesterday’s rain the ground is sticky and sodden.

Cathbad eventually left last night after Ruth promised to help clear his name. She would have promised almost anything to get him out of the house, he was giving her the creeps sitting there in his wizard’s cloak with his knowing grin. But, despite herself, as she digs, she can’t stop his words running on a continuous loop in

her head.

I felt sorry for you because you didn't get a look-in, what with his wife and girlfriend both on the dig ...

Did Erik and Shona have an affair on the henge dig? Shona is very gorgeous and Ruth knows that no man is impervious to beauty (look at Nelson with Michelle). But Erik has a beautiful wife of his own, and one, moreover, who seemed to share his interests and enthusiasms. Ruth thinks of Magda, whom she has always liked and admired. Magda has almost been a surrogate mother, one who won't say threateningly that she is praying for her or buy her an Oxfam goat for Christmas. Magda, with her sea-blue eyes and ash-blond hair, her voluptuous figure in fisherman's jumpers and faded jeans, her gleam of Nordic jewellery at the neck and wrists. Ruth remembers once reading about the goddess Freya, the patroness of hunters and musicians, with her sacred necklace and persuasive powers and thinking – that's Magda. Easy to imagine Magda, both youthful and ageless, holding the sacred distaff of life, the power of life and death. How could Erik have risked all this for an affair with Shona?

Is she jealous, Ruth asks herself as she trowels and sifts? Not sexually jealous. She has always known that Erik could never be interested in her, but she had thought that she was special to him. Hadn't he written on the title page of *The Shivering Sand*, 'To Ruth, my favourite pupil'? But it turns out that she hadn't been his favourite after all. Ruth digs her trowel into the soil with unnecessary venom, causing a mini landslide and earning her a shocked look from the dreadlocked girl next to her.

'Ruth!'

Eager to be distracted from her buzzing, unpleasant thoughts, Ruth looks up. Standing in the trench, she sees the newcomer from the bottom up: walking boots, waterproof trousers, mud-coloured jacket. David.

David kneels down on the edge of the trench.

'What's going on?' he asks.

Ruth pushes a lock of sweaty hair out of her eyes. 'It's an archaeological dig,' she says. 'We're excavating the Iron Age grave and the causeway.'

'Causeway?'

'Those buried posts you showed me. We think it's a Bronze Age causeway. A kind of pathway possibly leading to the henge.' Ruth

looks down, hoping David won't realise that it was she who told the archaeologists about the posts.

But David has other things on his mind. 'Well, mind you don't go near the hide. The furthest one. There's a rare Long Eared Owl nesting there.'

The Long Eared Owl sounds like he made him up but Ruth can see that David is genuinely worried. 'I'm sure we won't go near the hide,' she says soothingly. 'The trenches are all over to the south.'

David stands up, still looking anxious. 'By the way,' Ruth calls after him, 'thanks for looking after Flint. My cat.' She had meant to get him a box of chocolates or something.

His face is transformed by a sudden smile. 'That's OK,' he says. 'Any time.'

David is looking over towards the car park. Following his gaze, Ruth sees a familiar dirty Mercedes coming to a halt by the bird sanctuary notice board. Nelson, wearing jeans and a battered Barbour, gets out and strides towards the trench. Unconsciously, Ruth rubs her muddy hands on her trousers and tries to smooth her hair.

'Hello Ruth.' Ruth is fed up with looking up at people. She heaves herself out of the trench.

'Hello.'

'Bit of a circus, isn't it?' says Nelson, looking round disapprovingly at the archaeologists swarming over the site. The dreadlocked girl chooses this moment to start singing a high-pitched folk song. Nelson winces.

'It's all very organised,' says Ruth. 'Anyway, you gave permission for the dig.'

'Yes, well, I need all the help I can get.'

'Did you find anything at the henge circle?'

'Not a thing.' Nelson is silent, looking out, past the pegged-out trenches and the neat mounds of soil, towards the sea. He is thinking, she is sure, of the morning when they found Scarlet's body.

'I saw you yesterday,' says Nelson, 'at the funeral.'

'Yes,' says Ruth.

'Good of you to go.'

'I wanted to.'

Nelson looks as if he is going to say something else, but at that

moment a familiar lilting voice cuts in. 'Ah, Chief Inspector ...' It is Erik.

As far as Ruth knows, this is a promotion for Nelson, but he doesn't offer a correction. He greets Erik fairly cordially, and after a few words with Ruth the two men walk away talking intently. Ruth feels unaccountably irritated.

By lunchtime she is tired and fed up. She is considering sneaking off back to her cottage for a cup of tea and a hot bath when two slim hands wrap themselves over her eyes.

'Guess who?'

Ruth breaks free. She has recognised the perfume anyhow. Shona.

Shona flops down on the grass next to Ruth. 'Well?' she asks, smiling, 'found anything interesting?'

As usual Shona looks stunning despite (because of?) looking as if she hasn't tried. Her long hair is caught up in a messy bun and she is wearing jeans that make her legs look like pipe-cleaners and a puffy silver jacket which only emphasises her slimness. I'd look like a walking duvet wearing that, thinks Ruth.

'Just some more coins,' she says. 'Nothing much.'

'Where's Erik?' asks Shona, slightly too casually Ruth thinks.

'Talking to Nelson.'

'Really?' Shona raises her eyebrows at Ruth. 'I thought they couldn't stand each other.'

'So did I but they seem matey enough now.'

'Men,' says Shona lightly, pulling her jacket more tightly round her. 'It's bloody freezing. How long are you going to stay?'

'I was just thinking of going back to the house for a cup of tea.'

'What are we waiting for then?'

CHAPTER 21

On the way back to the house, Ruth wrestles with her conscience. Shona has really been very kind to her, letting her stay with her at a moment's notice. Ruth hasn't even thanked her properly, just disappeared yesterday leaving a brief answerphone message. She needs to go back and pick up her things. Shona has been a good friend to her over the years. When Ruth split up with Peter, she provided a shoulder to cry on plus several vats of white wine. They have spent countless evenings together, laughing, talking, crying. They even went on holiday together, to Italy, Greece and Turkey. Is Ruth really going to let Cathbad's spiteful rumours get in the way of this friendship?

'I'm sorry about taking off like that,' she says at last. 'For some reason after the funeral I just wanted to be at home.'

They have reached that home now. Ruth opens the door for Shona.

'That's OK,' says Shona. 'I completely understand. Was it awful, the funeral?'

'Yes,' says Ruth, putting on the kettle. 'It was terrible. The parents were just shattered. And the little coffin ... it was all too heart-breaking.'

'I can imagine,' says Shona, sitting down and taking off the silver jacket. 'There can't be anything worse than losing a child.'

Everyone says that, thinks Ruth, maybe because it's true. It's difficult to imagine anything worse than burying your child, a complete inversion of the natural order of things. Briefly, she thinks of Lucy Downey's parents walking away from the funeral, arm-in-arm. Was that worse? To lose your daughter and not be able to say goodbye?

She makes tea and sandwiches and they sit there companionably in silence. Outside it has started to rain, which strengthens Ruth's resolve not to go back to the dig.

Eventually Ruth says, 'I saw Cathbad yesterday.'

'Who?'

'Michael Malone. You know, the one they questioned about Scarlet's murder.'

'Jesus! Where did you see him?'

‘Here. He came to talk to me.’

‘Bloody hell, Ruth.’ Shona shivers. ‘I’d have been terrified.’

‘Why?’ asks Ruth, even though she had been so scared that she had slept last night with a kitchen knife by her bed. ‘He wasn’t charged with the murder, you know.’

‘I know, but even so. What did he want?’

‘Said he wanted me to clear his name.’

‘What a cheek.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ says Ruth, who has been obscurely flattered.

‘What’s he like, this Cathbad?’

Ruth looks at her. ‘Don’t you remember him? He remembers you.’

‘What?’ Shona has taken out her combs and shaken out her hair. She stares at Ruth, apparently bewildered.

‘Don’t you remember him from the henge dig? He was the leader of the druids. Always wore this big, purple cloak. He remembers you were sympathetic to them, joined in the protests.’

Shona smiles. ‘Cathbad ... Now I remember. Well, he was quite a gentle soul as I recall.’

‘Erik says he has magic powers.’

Now Shona laughs aloud. ‘Dear old Erik.’

‘Cathbad says you had an affair with Erik.’

‘What?’

‘Cathbad. He says you and Erik had an affair on the henge dig, ten years ago.’

‘Cathbad! What does he know?’

‘Did you?’

Instead of answering, Shona twists her hair into a tight knot and puts the combs back in, their little teeth digging viciously into her skull. She doesn’t look at Ruth, but Ruth knows the answer now.

‘How could you do it, Shona?’ she asks. ‘What about Magda?’

She is shocked at the virulence with which Shona turns on her.

‘What do you care about Magda, all of a sudden? You don’t know anything about it, sitting there, judging me. What about you and Peter? He’s married now, didn’t you know?’

‘Peter and I aren’t ...’ stammers Ruth. ‘We’re just friends,’ she finishes lamely. Inside, though, she knows that Shona is right. She is a hypocrite. What did she care about Michelle when she invited Nelson into her bed?

‘Oh yeah?’ sneers Shona. ‘You think you’re so perfect, Ruth, so above all those human feelings like love and hate and loneliness. Well, it’s not as simple as that. I was in love with Erik,’ she adds, in a slightly different tone.

‘Were you?’

Shona flares up again. ‘Yes, I bloody well was! *You* remember what he was like. I’d never met anyone like him. I thought he was so wise, so charismatic, I would have done anything for him. When he told me that he was in love with me, it was the most wonderful moment of my life.’

‘He told you that he was in love with you?’

‘Yes! Does that surprise you? Did you think he had the perfect marriage with Magda? Jesus, Ruth, they both have affairs all the time. Did you know about Magda’s toyboy, back home in Sweden?’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Ruth, you’re such an innocent! Magda has a twenty-year-old lover called Lars. He fixes her sauna and then hops into bed with her. And he’s one of many. In return, Erik does what he likes.’

To rid her mind of the image of Magda with her twenty-year-old handyman lover, Ruth turns to the window. The Saltmarsh has almost disappeared beneath the slanting, grey rain.

‘Did you think I was the first?’ asks Shona bitterly. ‘There are graduate students all over England who can say they went to bed with the great Erik Anderssen. It’s almost an essential part of your education.’

But not of my education, thinks Ruth. Erik treated me as a friend, a colleague, a promising student. He never once said a single word that could be construed as a sexual invitation.

‘If you knew he was like that,’ she asks at last, ‘why did you go to bed with him?’

Shona sighs. All the anger seems to seep out of her, leaving her limp, like her silver jacket lying collapsed on the floor.

‘I thought I was different, of course. Like all the other silly little cows, I thought I was the one he really loved. He said he’d never felt like that before, he said he’d leave Magda, that we’d get married, have children ...’ She stops, biting her lip.

And then Ruth remembers Shona’s first abortion, just a few months after the henge dig.

‘The baby ...’ she begins.

‘Was Erik’s,’ says Shona wearily. ‘Yes. I think it was then that I realised he didn’t mean any of it. When I told him I was pregnant, he just went mad, started pressuring me to have an abortion. Do you know, I actually thought he’d be pleased.’

Ruth says nothing. She thinks of Erik talking about his grown-up children: ‘You have to set them free.’ Well, he hadn’t wanted this one set free. As a fervent believer in a woman’s right to choose, Ruth doesn’t condemn Shona for having an abortion. But she does condemn Erik for his deceit, his hypocrisy, his ...

‘Poor Ruth,’ says Shona, looking at her with a strange, dispassionate smile. ‘All this is worse for you. You always admired him so much.’

‘Yes,’ says Ruth hoarsely. ‘Yes I did.’

‘He’s still a great archaeologist,’ says Shona. ‘I’m still friends with him. And with Magda,’ she adds with a slight laugh. ‘I guess it’s just the way he is.’

‘I guess so,’ says Ruth tightly.

Shona rises, picking up her silver jacket. At the door she turns. ‘Don’t blame either of us too much, Ruth,’ she says.

*

When Shona has gone, Ruth sits down at the table. She is amazed to find that she is shaking. What is so surprising about finding out that two grown-up people have had an affair? Alright, Erik was married, but these things happen as she knows all too well. Why does she feel let down, angry, *betrayed*?

She supposes that she must really have been in love with Erik all these years. She remembers when she first met him, as a graduate student in Southampton, the way that he seemed to take her mind apart, shuffle it and put it back together a different shape. He changed her view of everything: archaeology, landscape, nature, art, relationships. She remembers him saying, ‘The human desire is to live, to cheat death, to live forever. It is the same over all the ages. It is why we build monuments to death so that they live on after we die.’ Did Erik’s desire to live simply mean that he could do whatever he wanted?

And when she met Magda she had been so pleased. She had thought nobody could be good enough for Erik but Magda was. She had loved their relationship, that affectionate companionship,

so different from her parents' stilted formality. She could never imagine Erik and Magda calling each other Mummy and Daddy or driving to a garden centre on a Sunday afternoon. They lived the perfect life, climbing mountains, sailing, spending the winters writing and researching and the summers digging. She remembers the log cabin by the lake in Norway, the meals eaten on the deck, the hot tub, the evenings eating, drinking and talking. Talking. That's what she remembers most about Erik and Magda. They had always talked, argued sometimes, but always they had listened to each other's views. Ruth remembers many times listening to Erik and Magda as, glasses of wine in their hands and the Northern lights shining above them, they had fitted their differing theories together so that they came up with something new, better, more complete. Not for them the moment described by Peter: 'We just ran out of things to say to each other.'

Ruth is not stupid. She knows that she created idealised parents in Magda and Erik and that is why she feels so let down now. And if she was also secretly in love with Erik, well that just makes a perfect Freudian hole-in-one. What upsets her most, she thinks, looking out over the rain-sodden marshland, is that she had thought she was special. Even if Erik had not fancied her, he had thought her an especially talented student. On the henge dig he had continually deferred to her. 'Ruth will understand this even if the rest of you don't' implied that he and she shared a special understanding. Ruth, he had said, had 'an archaeologist's sense', a quality which, apparently, cannot be taught. Erik's approval has carried Ruth through many difficult years, insulated her against Phil's patronising indifference, comforted her when she never quite seemed able to get that book proposal down on paper.

She knows it is childish, but Ruth feels that she needs to be reminded of Erik's good opinion, so she takes down her copy of his book *The Shivering Sand*. She opens it at the title page. There it is, in black and white. *To Ruth, my favourite pupil*.

Ruth looks at the words for a long moment. It is as if she has suddenly seen a gross misshapen shadow on the wall – the horns and the tail and the cloven hoofs. Blindly, almost staggering, she gets up and goes to the desk where she keeps her copies of the Lucy Downey letters. Hands shaking, she leafs through the letters

until she gets to the two that are handwritten.

She lays them on the table next to Erik's dedication. The handwriting is the same.

CHAPTER 22

For what seems like hours, she just stands there, unable to move. Almost unable to breathe. An icy paralysis seems to have taken over her whole body. Think, Ruth, think. Breathe. Can Erik really have written these letters? Is it possible that Erik, as well as being a hypocrite and a serial seducer, is also a murderer?

The worst thing is that she can almost believe it. Erik knows about archaeology. He knows about Norse legends and Neolithic ritual and the power of the landscape. She can hear his voice, that beloved singsong voice, telling campfire stories of water spirits and shape-changers and the creatures of the dark. With a sudden, fresh chill she remembers his words that very morning: *The poor girl is dead. She is buried, she is at peace.* Almost an exact echo of one of the letters.

Can it possibly be true? Erik was still living in England when Lucy Downey vanished. It was just after the henge dig. He could have sent those early letters. He didn't go back to Norway until eight years later. But could he have sent the recent letters about Scarlet Henderson? He has only been back in England since January. Nelson showed her a letter dated last November. 'He hasn't forgotten,' said Nelson. Could Erik have sent that letter? – or arranged to have someone else send it?

It's crazy, Ruth tells herself, moving stiffly to stroke Flint who is purring round her ankles. Erik would not be capable of writing those evil, taunting, *warped* letters. He is a humanitarian, the first to support striking miners or victims of natural disasters. He is kind and thoughtful; comforting Ruth in the shock of Peter's marriage, grieving with Shona when her father died. But he is also, thinks Ruth, the man who speaks approvingly of human sacrifice ('isn't the same thing happening in Christian Holy Communion?'), who advised Ruth to forget Peter with another lover ('it's the easiest way') and who, presumably, was sleeping with Shona and encouraging her to abort their child whilst weeping with her about her father. Erik is amoral, he is somehow outside normal human rules; that is one of the most attractive things about him. But is it also something that makes him capable of unimaginable evil?

If he wrote the letters, did he kill the two little girls? Mechanically feeding Flint, Ruth realises that she has poured the cat food right over the sides of the bowl. Flint pushes furrily past her to get at the food. She remembers a conversation she had with him about her Iron Age body. 'How could anyone do that?' she had asked. 'Kill a child for some religious ritual?' 'Look at it this way,' Erik had said calmly. 'Maybe it's a good way to go. Saves the child the disillusionment of growing up.' He had smiled as he said it but Ruth remembers feeling chilled. Could Erik have killed the two girls to save them the disillusionment of growing up?

She can't bear it any more. Grabbing her coat and bag, she rushes out into the rain. She is going to speak to Shona.

*

Shona is still out when she arrives. Ruth slumps down on the doorstep, too exhausted to remember that she has a key. She just sits there, looking at the people going in and out of the Tesco Express and wondering what it must be like to have no more to worry about than whether to have chops or sausages for supper and whether you've got enough potatoes for chips. Her own life seems to have become dark and grim, like the sort of film she would avoid watching late at night. When did this happen? When they dug down into the peat and found the body of Scarlet Henderson? When she first saw Nelson, standing in the university corridor? When she first looked down at her student introductory pack and saw the words, Personal Tutor: Erik Anderssen?

When Shona eventually appears, swinging down the road carrying a Thresher's bag and a rented DVD, she looks so blameless, so innocent, with her long legs and silver jacket, that Ruth thinks that she must be mistaken. No way can Shona be mixed up in any of this. She is Ruth's dear friend, her crazy, lovable, scatty friend. But, then, Shona sees Ruth, and a curious trapped look comes over her face, like a fox cornered in a suburban garden. Almost instantly though, charm breaks out again and she smiles, proffering the bag and the DVD.

'Girls' night in,' she says. 'Want to join me?'

'I've got to talk to you.'

Now Shona looks positively terrified. 'OK,' she says, opening

the door. 'You'd better come in.'

Ruth doesn't even give Shona time to take off her coat.

'Did Erik write those letters?'

'What letters?' asks Shona nervously.

Ruth looks around the room, at the sanded floor and the trendy rugs, at the photos in decorated frames – almost all of Shona herself, she notices now – at the patchwork throw over the sofa, at the new novels stacked on the table, at the bookshelves with their battered copies of the classics, from T.S. Eliot to Shakespeare. Then she looks back at Shona.

'Jesus,' she says, 'you helped him, didn't you?'

Shona seems to look around for a means of escape, the trapped fox again, but then, as if finally surrendering, she collapses onto the sofa and covers her face.

Ruth comes nearer. 'You helped him, didn't you?' she says. 'Of course, he'd never have thought of all that T.S. Eliot stuff by himself, would he? You're the literature expert. Your Catholic background probably helped too. He supplied the archaeology and the mythology, you did the rest. Quite the perfect little team.'

'It wasn't like that,' says Shona dully.

'No? What was it like?'

Shona looks up. Her hair has come down and her eyes are wet, yet Ruth is beyond being moved by her appearance. So Shona is beautiful and she's upset. So what? She's played that trick too many times before.

'It was him. Nelson,' says Shona.

'What?'

'Erik hates him,' says Shona, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. 'That's why he wrote the letters, to get at Nelson. To distract him. To stop him solving the case. To punish him.'

'What for?' whispers Ruth.

'James Agar,' says Shona. 'He was Erik's student. At Manchester. It was during the poll tax riots. Apparently a group of students attacked a policeman and he was killed. James Agar was only on the outskirts of the group. He didn't do anything but Nelson framed him.'

'Who told you this? Erik?'

'It was common knowledge. Everyone knew it. Even the police. Nelson wanted a scapegoat so he picked on James.'

'He wouldn't do that,' says Ruth. 'Wouldn't he? She thinks.'

‘Oh, I know you like him. Erik says you’ve been totally taken in by him.’

‘Does he?’ Despite everything, the bitchiness of this still stings. ‘And you weren’t taken in by Erik, I suppose?’

‘Oh, I was,’ says Shona wearily. ‘I was obsessed with him. I would have done anything for him.’

‘Even helped to write those letters?’

Shona looks up, her face defiant. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Even that.’

‘But why, Shona? This was a murder investigation. You were probably helping the murderer get away.’

‘Nelson’s a murderer,’ snaps Shona. ‘James Agar died in prison, a year after Nelson framed him. He killed himself.’

Ruth thinks of Cathbad’s poem ‘In praise of James Agar’. She thinks of Nelson’s face as he looked down at the scrawled lines. She thinks of the locked cabinet in Cathbad’s caravan.

‘Cathbad,’ she says at last. ‘Where does he come into this?’

Shona laughs, slightly hysterically. ‘Didn’t you know?’ she says. ‘He was the postman.’

CHAPTER 23

Nelson has had a tough day. But then again, he almost can't remember a time when his life didn't consist of defending himself against people who wanted him sacked, trying to motivate an increasingly depressed team and ignoring Michelle's demands to come home while at the same time trying to catch a murderer. He had thought that Scarlet's funeral yesterday must be the lowest point. Jesus, that little white coffin, Scarlet's brothers and sisters looking so shocked and vulnerable in their new black clothes, seeing Lucy Downey's parents again and feeling how he had let them down. And then having to stand up and spout all that stuff about the resurrection and the life. He had caught sight of Ruth in the congregation and wondered if she was thinking what he was thinking: the letter writer would love this.

And then there is Ruth. He knows he shouldn't have gone to bed with her. It was totally unprofessional as well as wrong. He has betrayed Michelle, whom he loves. He has, in fact, been unfaithful on two other occasions but he comforts himself that these were brief flings which didn't mean anything. Did Ruth mean something then? She's not really his type. But, that night, he has to admit, was something else. At that moment, Ruth seemed to understand him totally, in a way that Michelle has never done. She seemed to understand, to forgive him and offer herself to him in a way that even now threatens to bring tears to his eyes. Why had she done it? What does she see in him? He's not intellectual enough for her. She likes poncy professors with theories about Iron Age pottery, not uneducated Northern policemen.

So why had Ruth slept with him? She made the first move, he tells himself for the hundredth time. It wasn't all his fault. He can only suppose that she, like him, was caught up in the horror of it all, finding Scarlet's body, telling the parents. The only escape was in simple, straightforward sex. Some of the best sex, he has to admit, that he has ever had.

He doesn't know where he stands with her now. She's not the sort who will go all soppy, declaring undying love and begging him to leave Michelle. He has spoken to her on the phone a few

times and she has always seemed fine, professional and calm, despite having some scary stuff to cope with. He admires that. Ruth is tough, like him. When he saw her yesterday at the dig, she had been very cool. He'd watched her as he approached, she was totally absorbed in her work, he was sure she had no idea that he was there. He doesn't know why, but suddenly he wanted her to look up, to wave, smile, even to rush over and fling her arms round him. Of course, she hadn't done any of these things. She had simply carried on with her job, just as he was carrying on with his. It was the sensible, adult way to behave.

He had quite a good chat with that Erik Anderssen bloke at the dig. Of course he's an old hippie, way too old to have his hair in a pony tail and wear all those leather bracelets. But still, he had told Nelson some interesting things. Turns out there's a prehistoric forest buried underneath the Saltmarsh. That's why you sometimes find odd-looking stumps of trees and bits of timber. They even found some wood that had come all the way from North America. Anderssen had also talked about ritual. 'Think of a burial,' he'd said. 'From the body to the wood of the coffin to the stone of the graveyard.' Nelson had shivered, remembering Scarlet's coffin, that little wooden box, on its final journey.

He'd come back from the dig to be met by his boss. Superintendent Whitcliffe is a career policeman, a graduate who favours linen suits and slip-on shoes. Just standing near him makes Nelson feel shop-soiled and more than usually untidy. He has the sensation, which he remembers from school, of his hands and feet being several sizes larger than they ought to be. Still, Nelson is not about to let Whitcliffe push him around. He's a good cop; he knows it and Whitcliffe knows it. He's not going to be the scapegoat on this case.

'Ah, Harry,' Whitcliffe had said, managing to convey the message that Nelson should have been there to meet him, though he had not said he was coming. 'Been out and about?'

'Following up leads.' He was damned if he was going to add 'sir'.

'We need to talk, Harry,' Whitcliffe had said, sitting down behind Nelson's desk and neatly establishing superiority. 'We need another statement.'

'We've got nothing to say.'

‘That’s just it, Harry,’ sighed Whitcliffe, ‘we need to have something to say. The press are after our blood. You arrest Malone and then release him—’

‘On bail.’

‘Yes, on bail,’ said Whitcliffe tetchily. ‘That doesn’t change the fact that you’ve got no evidence to charge him with the murders. And without him you’ve got no suspects. With all the coverage of the little girl’s funeral, we need to be seen to be doing something.’

The little girl’s funeral. Whitcliffe had been there, in neat black tie, saying caring, compassionate things to Scarlet’s parents. But for him it was just another job, an exercise in damage limitation. He had not, like Nelson, gone home and puked his guts out.

‘I am *doing something*,’ said Nelson, ‘I’ve been working flat out for months. We’ve searched every inch of the Saltmarsh ...’

‘I hear you’ve let the archaeologists loose there today.’

‘Have you seen how they work?’ demanded Nelson. ‘They really examine every inch of ground. It’s all planned, nothing missed, nothing overlooked. Our forensic teams could never match it. If there’s anything to find, they’ll find it.’

Whitcliffe smiled. A humorous, understanding smile that made Nelson want to smack him. ‘You sound quite a fan of archaeology, Harry.’

Nelson grunted. ‘Lots of it’s bollocks, of course, but you can’t deny they know their stuff. And I like the way they do things. It’s organised. I like organisation.’

‘What about this Ruth Galloway? She seems to have become quite involved in the case.’

Nelson looked up warily. ‘Doctor Galloway’s been a great help.’

‘She found the body.’

‘She had a theory. I thought it was worth testing.’

‘Has she any other theories?’ Whitcliffe was smiling again.

‘We’ve all got theories,’ said Nelson, standing up. ‘Theories are cheap. What we haven’t got is any evidence.’

All the same, he knows he can’t stall Whitcliffe forever. He will have to give a statement to the press and what the hell can he say? Malone was the only suspect, and for a while he had seemed quite promising. He fitted what Whitcliffe would call ‘the offender profile’. He had links with the Henderson family, he was a drifter and he was full of all that New Age crap, just like the

writer of the letters. But then they had found Scarlet's body and there was DNA all over it. The only problem was that none of it matched Malone's. Without the DNA link, Nelson was stuffed. He'd had to let Malone go, only charging him with wasting police time.

Scarlet had been tied up, gagged and strangled. Then someone had carried her body right out to the peat beds and buried her where that henge thing used to be. Does this mean the murderer had to know about the henge? Ruth said that there is a path, a causeway or something, leading right to the place where Scarlet was buried. Were the police meant to find her, then? Has the murderer been watching them all the time, laughing at them? He knows that the killer is often someone known to the family, someone close. How close? Was it the killer who left those messages on Ruth's phone? Is he watching her too? Despite himself, Nelson shivers. It's late now and the incident rooms are deserted.

He knows he'll be blamed if they don't find Scarlet's killer. He knows too that it won't be long before the press makes the link with Lucy Downey. They don't know about the letters of course, and he'll be crucified if that gets out, but in some ways none of that bothers him. He's got no time for the press – one reason why, despite Michelle's fantasies, he'll never make chief constable – and he knows he's done his best. No. He wants to find the killer for the sake of Lucy's and Scarlet's families. He wants to put the bastard away forever. It won't bring Lucy and Scarlet back but it will, at least, mean that justice has been done. The words have a cold, biblical ring that surprises him, but when you come down to it that is what police work is all about. Protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty. Saint Harry the Avenger.

A sound downstairs makes him sit up. He hears the desk sergeant's voice. It sounds as if he is remonstrating with someone. Maybe he ought to investigate. Nelson gets up and starts towards the door. And finds himself colliding with his expert witness, Doctor Ruth Galloway.

'Jesus,' says Nelson, putting out both hands to steady her.

'I'm OK.' Ruth leaps away as if he is infectious. For a second they stare awkwardly at each other. Ruth looks a mess, her hair wild, her coat on inside out. Christ, thinks Nelson, maybe she is a bunny boiler after all.

'I'm sorry,' she is saying, taking off her dripping coat, 'but I had to come.'

'What's the matter?' asks Nelson neutrally, retreating behind his desk.

In answer, Ruth slams a book and a piece of paper down on his desk. He recognises the paper instantly as a copy of one of the letters. The book means nothing to him though Ruth has opened it and is pointing at some writing on the first page.

'Look!' she is saying urgently.

To humour her, he looks. Then he looks again.

'Who wrote this?' he asks quietly.

'Erik. Erik Anderssen.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. And his girlfriend confirms it. He wrote the letters.'

'His girlfriend?'

'Shona. My ... my colleague at the university. She's his girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend, if you like. Anyway, she admits he wrote the letters and she helped him.'

'Jesus. Why?'

'Because he hates you. Because of James Agar.'

'James Agar?'

'You know, the student who was accused of murdering that policeman.'

Whatever he expected it wasn't this. James Agar. The poll tax riots, police bussed in from five forces, the streets full of tear gas and placards, trying to hold the line, students spitting in his face, the alley where Stephen Naylor's body had been found. Naylor, a new recruit, only twenty-two, stabbed to death with a kitchen knife. James Agar, coming towards him, eyes unfocused, carrying the bloody knife as if it didn't belong to him.

'James Agar was guilty,' says Nelson flatly.

'He committed suicide in prison,' says Ruth. 'Erik blames you. James Agar was his student. He says you framed him.'

'Bollocks. There were a dozen witnesses. Agar was guilty alright. Do you mean to tell me that Anderssen wrote all these letters, all this ... *crap* ... because of some student?'

'That's what Shona says. She says Erik hated you and wanted to stop you solving the Lucy Downey case. He thought the letters would distract you, like the Jack-the-Ripper tapes distracted the

police in Yorkshire.'

'He wanted the murderer to go free?'

'He sees you as a murderer.'

Ruth says this without emphasis, giving no clue what she actually thinks. Suddenly Nelson feels angry, thinking of Ruth and Erik and this Shona, all academics together, siding, as bleeding-heart lefties always do, with the villains rather than the police.

'I'm sure you agree with him,' he says bitterly.

'I don't know anything about it,' says Ruth wearily. She does look tired, Nelson realises, her face white, her hands shaking. He relents slightly.

'What about Malone?' he asks. 'He wrote a poem about James Agar. Do you remember? He even offered it as an example of his handwriting.'

'Cathbad was James Agar's friend,' says Ruth. 'They were students together at Manchester.'

'Was he involved in writing the letters?'

'He posted them,' says Ruth, 'Erik wrote the letters, with Shona's help, and Cathbad posted them from different places. Remember, he told us he was a postman?'

'What about the recent letters? I thought Anderssen had been out of the country.'

'Erik emailed them to Cathbad. He printed them out and posted them.'

'Have you spoken to Anderssen?'

'No.' Ruth looks down. 'I went to see Shona and then I came to you.'

'Why not go direct to Anderssen?'

Ruth looks up, meeting Nelson's gaze steadily. 'Because I'm scared of him,' she says.

Nelson leans forward and puts his hand on hers. 'Ruth, do you think Anderssen killed Lucy and Scarlet?'

And Ruth answers, so quietly he can hardly hear her. 'Yes.'

There are the sounds again but this time she is ready for them. She crouches, holding her stone, prepared to spring if the trapdoor opens. When he comes down with her food, she watches the back of his head as he puts the plates on the floor. Where would be the right place? On top, where the hair is going all straggly? At the back of his neck,

horribly red and raw-looking? He turns to look at her and she wonders if this isn't the best way, right in the face, between the eyes, in his awful, gaping mouth, across his horrid, guppy neck.

He examines her, which she hates. Looks into her mouth, feels her arm muscles, makes her turn round and lift up her feet, one after the other.

'You're growing,' he says. 'You need some new clothes.'

Clothes. The word reminds her of something. A smell, that's it. A soft, comforting smell. Something held against her face, silky, smooth, rubbing between her thumb and forefinger. But he is talking about what's on her body: a long, scratchy, top thing and trousers that seem suddenly to be too short. She can see quite a bit of her legs sticking out at the bottom. They look white, like the inside of a twig. They look like they can't possibly work, but they do. She has been practising running, round and round this little room, on the spot, up and down. She knows that soon she will have to run for real.

He cuts her nails with a funny red knife he keeps in his pocket. She'd like a knife like that. If she had one she'd ... but her head gets all red and buzzy and she has to stop thinking.

'Don't worry about the noises outside,' he says. 'It's just ... animals.'

Animals. Pony, dog, cat, rabbit, incy wincey spider climbing the water spout. She says nothing, feeling the stone in her pocket. She likes it when it cuts her, just a little bit.

He looks at her. 'Are you alright?' he says.

She doesn't answer. Instead she hangs her head down so she can't see him. Her hair is long, it smells of dust. Sometimes he cuts her hair with the little knife. She remembers a story where someone escapes by climbing on hair. Does she have enough hair to make a ladder? It doesn't sound possible; it's one of those things that only happens in stories. Escape. Does that only happen in stories too?

So she says nothing. And, when he goes, the quiet fills the room, beating against the sides. Making her head ache.

CHAPTER 24

Ruth sits in Nelson's office, a cup of undrinkable coffee in front of her. It is cold in the high-ceilinged room. She is still wearing her digging trousers, baggy army-surplus, but, stupidly had taken off her thick jumper back at her house. It seems like days ago. Her coat is still dripping and is anyway far too thin. She wishes she had worn her sou'wester or an anorak. She wraps her hands around the plastic cup. At least it is hot.

Nelson has disappeared to round up some officers to arrest Erik. *Arrest Erik*. The words have an impossible sound; that Erik should be a suspect in a murder case, that Ruth should be the one to direct the police to his door. It seems crazy, like a nightmare. It seems that one minute she was sitting in her little house by the Saltmarsh, preparing her lectures, grumbling about her mother and listening to Radio 4, and now she is in the middle of this drama of murder and betrayal. It is as if she has pressed the wrong button on her TV remote control and, just at this instant, she would give anything to switch back to the boring programme about crop rotation.

Nelson crashes back into the room accompanied by Judy, the policewoman Ruth met at the funeral.

'Right,' he says, grabbing his jacket, 'let's go. I'll go in the first car with Cloughie. Ruth, you follow behind with Judy. On no account are you to get out of the car. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' says Ruth, rather sulkily. She wants to remind Nelson that she is not one of his officers.

The cars set off through the night. It is still raining, a slow, steady drizzle sparkling in the headlights. The cars head out of King's Lynn and along the coast road, past deserted caravan parks and boarded-up family hotels. Ruth leans her head against the cold window and thinks about her first view of Norfolk, arriving that summer with her tent and bedroll, driving from Norwich station with Erik and Magda, seeing the Saltmarsh in all its evening splendour, the sand stretching for miles, the sea a faint line of blue against the horizon. Could she have imagined then that this is how it would end? In a speeding police car on the way to accuse her former mentor of murder ...

Nelson's car comes to a halt in front of the blameless-looking seaside guest house. The Sandringham, it's called, though any resemblance to the Queen's house must exist only in the owner's fevered imagination. The look, Ruth notes, is traditional seaside kitsch: net curtains, gnomes in the garden, stained glass over the front door. Nelson and Sergeant Clough climb the crazy-paving steps and Clough leans heavily on the doorbell. *The Sandringham Guest House*, reads the sign, *Bed and Breakfast, En-suite rooms, colour TV, home cooking. Vacancies.*

Ruth cringes inside the second car. What will Erik say when he looks in the car and sees Ruth sitting there? Will he know she has betrayed him? Because, despite everything, she still thinks of it as a betrayal. She has delivered Erik into Nelson's hands. She feels like Judas.

It is nearly ten o'clock and there is only one light on inside the guest house. It's upstairs, directly above the door. Ruth remembers Erik telling her that he was the only guest – February is, after all, hardly the holiday season. Is that his light then? Is he inside, calmly working on some scholarly article about Bronze Age Field Systems?

Ruth sees the front door open. Nelson leans forward, speaking to the unseen opener. Ruth imagines him waving his warrant card like they do in films, before barging his way inside yelling, 'Police! Freeze!' But she is disappointed. The door shuts and Nelson and Clough make their way slowly back to the car.

Nelson leans in through the window. His forearm rests on the window frame a few inches away from Ruth. She has to fight an insane desire to touch it.

'He's gone,' says Nelson.

'Gone for good?' asks Judy, twisting round in the front seat.

'Looks like it. His room's empty. He left a cheque to pay his tab.'

For a second, Ruth feels absurdly pleased that Erik hasn't run off without paying. Then she thinks, he could be a murderer, isn't that a bit worse than not paying a hotel bill?

'What now?' asks Judy.

Nelson looks at Ruth. 'Any ideas, Doctor Galloway?'

Ruth doesn't meet his eye. 'He could be with Shona, I suppose.'

Shona's house is in darkness. At first Ruth thinks that she must be out (with Erik?) but, after a few minutes, she appears at the

door wearing a dressing gown. She looks rumpled and, even at this distance, slightly drunk.

Judy has gone to the door this time. Maybe this, like bereavement, is another moment when they send for a woman officer. The police, like the Neanderthals, don't seem a very enlightened society.

Shona steps back to allow Judy to enter. Alone in the car, Ruth starts to shiver. She jumps when the passenger door opens.

Nelson leans in.

'Are you OK?'

'Fine,' she says, setting her jaw to stop her teeth chattering.

'You're freezing. Hang on.'

He pulls off his heavy police jacket and hands it to her. 'Put this on.'

'But it's yours.'

He shrugs. 'I'm not cold. Keep it.'

Ruth pulls on the jacket gratefully. It smells of garages and, very faintly, of Nelson's aftershave. Nelson, in his shirtsleeves, certainly does not seem cold. He jogs slightly on the balls of his feet, impatient for Judy to come back. Ruth is reminded of the first time that she saw him and the way he had almost run up the hill towards the buried bones.

At last Judy is coming out of the house. Nelson goes to meet her. They confer quickly and then Judy gets back in the car.

'He's not there,' she tells Ruth. 'She says she hasn't seen him. I'm putting out a call to all units. The boss says I've got to take you to a safe house.'

Ruth watches Nelson getting into the other car. He gave me his jacket, she thinks, but he can't be bothered to say goodbye. Suddenly, she feels incredibly tired.

'Is there anyone you could stay with?' asks Judy.

Ruth looks back at Shona's house. The lights are off. No more girls' nights in for her there.

'A friend?' prompts Judy. 'Family?'

'There is someone,' says Ruth.

*

The house is one of a row of fisherman's cottages on the seafront near Burnham Ovary. Squat, whitewashed, used to withstanding

the wind and rain from the sea. Ruth stands irresolute on the doorstep, listening to the waves crashing against the sea wall. What if he isn't there? Will she have to sleep under her desk at the university, to be woken at nine by Mr Tan and her other students? At the moment, it seems quite an attractive proposition.

Ruth looks back at the police car, which is discreetly waiting in the street. She wonders if the neighbours are watching behind their curtains.

'Ruth!' She swings round to see Peter silhouetted in a rectangle of light. Ruth opens her mouth to tell him about Erik and Shona and to ask him for a place to sleep but, to her intense embarrassment, she starts to cry. Huge, gulping, unromantic sobs.

Peter reaches out and draws her inside. 'It's OK,' he says. 'It's OK.'

And he shuts the door behind them.

CHAPTER 25

'I'm sorry,' says Ruth, sitting down on Peter's sofa. As in all rented houses, the furniture looks the wrong shape for the room. The sofa is mysteriously uncomfortable.

'What's going on?' asks Peter, still stranded in the doorway.

'You'd better sit down,' says Ruth.

She tells him about the letters, about Shona and Erik and, finally, about the match with Erik's handwriting.

'Jesus.' Peter lets out a long sigh. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' says Ruth, 'and Shona admits it. They wrote the letters because they wanted to disrupt the investigation.'

'Why would they want to do that?'

'Because one of Erik's students was accused of murdering a policeman. He was found guilty and committed suicide in jail. He blames Nelson, the policeman in charge of the Scarlet Henderson case.'

'Why?'

'Nelson gave evidence against the student. James Agar, his name was.'

'And the police are now after Erik?'

'Yes, but he seems to have disappeared.'

'What about Shona?'

'She says she doesn't know where he is.'

Peter is silent for a moment and then he looks at Ruth, his face troubled. 'Do they ... do the police think that Erik could have murdered the little girl?'

'They think it's a possibility.'

'And what do you think?'

Ruth hesitates before answering. If she is honest, she no longer knows what she thinks. She believed that Erik was omnipotent and that Shona was her friend. Now neither of those things seems to be true.

'I don't know,' she says at last, 'but I think it must be a possibility. The letter writer seemed to leave clues about where Scarlet's body was buried.'

'Could that just be a coincidence?'

Ruth thinks of the cryptic, teasing tone of the letters. 'It could

be. The letters hint at all sorts of things. It's easy to read things into them.'

'Why would Erik want to kill her?'

Ruth sighs. 'Who knows? Maybe he thought he needed to make a sacrifice to the Gods.'

'You don't believe that, surely?'

'No I don't. But maybe Erik did.'

Peter is silent once more.

*

Peter makes omelettes and opens a bottle of red. Ruth eats hungrily. Lunch with Shona seems centuries ago. They both drink a good deal, keen to blot out the evening's revelations.

'You know,' Peter keeps saying. 'I just can't believe it of Erik. He always seemed a real New Ager to me. Into peace and love and free dope for all. I just can't imagine that he would kill a little girl.'

'But what if he really believed all that stuff – about sacrifices and offerings to the Gods? Maybe he felt he needed to make an offering to appease the Gods for taking the henge away.'

'You're saying that he's mad.'

Ruth is silent, swirling the red wine round in her glass. 'Who are we to say what is mad and what is sane?'

'You're quoting Erik!'

'Yes.' Ruth tucks her feet under her on the sofa. Despite everything, she is beginning to feel very sleepy.

'You loved him didn't you?' says Peter in a different voice.

'What?'

'You loved him. All the time I thought it was me but it was Erik. He was the one you really loved.'

'No,' protests Ruth. 'I did love him, but as a friend. As a teacher, I suppose. I loved Magda too. It was different with you.'

'Was it?' Peter crosses the room and kneels in front of her. 'Was it, Ruth?'

'Yes.'

Peter kisses her and, for a second, she feels herself dissolving into his arms. Would this be so wrong, she asks herself? He is separated from his wife, she is single. Who would they be hurting?

‘God, Ruth,’ Peter murmurs into her neck, ‘I’ve missed you so much. I love you.’

That does it. Ruth sits up, pushing Peter away. ‘No.’

‘What?’ Peter is beside her on the sofa now, his arms around her.

‘You don’t love me.’

‘I do. It was a mistake, marrying Victoria. You and I were always meant to be together.’

‘No, we weren’t.’

‘Why not?’

Ruth takes a deep breath. It seems very important to get this right. To have one thing that is clear and straight and unambiguous. ‘I don’t love you,’ she says. ‘Is it OK if I sleep on the sofa?’

*

She wakes in the morning to find herself covered with Nelson’s jacket and with a duvet. Grey light is streaming in through the thin curtains. The time on her mobile is 07:15. No new messages. Ruth sits up, her head hurts and her eyes feel gritty. How much did she have to drink last night? Two empty bottles lie on the floor. Not much by undergraduate standards perhaps but more than she has drunk for years. She can’t even remember going to sleep. She remembers Peter slamming out of the room after she told him that she didn’t love him. He must have come back though, to put the duvet over her. God, she feels sick.

She gets up, intending to find a loo and a shower, but when she opens the door she comes face-to-face with Peter, carrying a cup of tea.

‘Thank you,’ she says, taking the cup. ‘I feel terrible.’

Peter smiles. ‘So do I. We’re not young anymore, Ruth. Bathroom’s upstairs, by the way. First on the left. Towels in the airing cupboard next door.’

‘Thanks,’ says Ruth. Perhaps it’s not going to be so bad after all.

It’s horrible, putting her old clothes on after her shower but at least she is clean. Wrapping her hair in a towel, she goes downstairs. Peter is making toast in the tiny kitchen.

Ruth sits down, trying to think of a subject that will clear the air: something light and non-controversial. Should they talk about

the weather, the dig, what's happening in *The Archers*? She needs something that reminds Peter of his real life, away from Norfolk, of his wife and child.

'Have you got a picture of your little boy?' asks Ruth at last. 'I haven't seen him since he was a baby.'

Peter looks surprised but he gets out his phone, a sleek, black affair, and pushes it across the table to Ruth. 'In there,' he says. 'Under PICTURES.'

Ruth scrolls down, with difficulty. She hates these tiny phones. They make her feel like a giantess. The first picture is of a smiling, red-headed boy.

'Do you think he looks like me?' asks Peter.

'Yes,' says Ruth, though the photo is so small it's hard to see.

'It's the red hair. In the face he looks more like Victoria.'

Ruth clicks down, trying to find more pictures. All the pictures seem to be of Daniel though she does see one of the Saltmarsh, a tiny grey rectangle. There are no pictures of Victoria.

'What are you going to do now?' asks Peter, putting toast in front of her.

'Go into work, tidy things up there. Then maybe go away for a bit. See my parents.'

As she says this, she has a sudden vision of the M11 stretching out in front of her, grey and featureless. Her mother will be sure to ask about Peter.

'Blimey. Things must be desperate.'

Ruth smiles, but when she looks at Peter his face is suddenly dark. He looks, for a second, like a stranger.

'Remember Ruth,' he says. 'I know where you are.'

*

'Is Erik really a suspect?' asks Phil, shutting his office door behind her. 'What's going on, Ruth?'

'I'm not sure,' lies Ruth. 'I just know the police want to talk to him.'

All the way to the university, she has been thinking about Peter's words. *I know where you are*. Could Peter have sent her those messages? She has never given him her mobile number but it would have been easy enough for him to get it. He could have asked anyone. Erik, Shona, even Phil. But why would Peter want

to scare her like that? It doesn't make sense, but one thing is clear – she can trust no-one.

'What's going on?' repeats Phil, obviously trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. 'The police have been here looking for Erik. We had your friend Shona from the English department here earlier. She was very distraught.'

Ruth can just imagine Shona sobbing picturesquely on Phil's shoulder. Maybe he's next on her married lecturers list.

'They surely can't' – Phil lowers his voice dramatically – '*suspect him?*'

'I don't know,' says Ruth wearily. 'Look Phil, I've got a favour to ask you. The police think I should get away for a few days and I was thinking of going to my parents in London. Is it OK if I have a few days off? I've only got one lecture and a tutorial this week.'

But Phil is still staring at her, wide-eyed. 'Do they think you're in danger? From Erik?'

'I'm sorry, Phil,' says Ruth, 'I can't say any more. Is it OK if I have the time off?'

'Of course,' says Phil. Then, 'Can I ask you something, Ruth?'

'Yes,' says Ruth warily.

'Why are you wearing a policeman's jacket?'

*

She had meant to leave early but it's getting dark by the time she reaches the Saltmarsh. All at once there seemed to be so many things to do: cancelling her lecture, arranging for Phil to take her tutorial on Animal Remains in Wetland Archaeology, ringing her parents to warn them of her arrival, avoiding Shona's increasingly desperate messages. Then, in the middle of it all, Nelson had rung.

'Ruth. You OK?'

'Fine.'

'Judy said she took you to a friend's house last night. I don't want you to do that again. I want you in a safe house.'

'I'm going to my parents. In London.'

A pause.

'Good. That's good.' He sounded distracted; she could almost hear him shuffling through papers as he talked.

'Have you found Erik yet?' she asked.

‘No. He seems to have vanished off the face of the earth. But we’ll get him. We’ve got people watching the guest house, his girlfriend’s house, the university. There’s an alert at all the airports.’

‘What about Cathbad’s place?’

‘Oh, we’ve thought of that. I paid a visit to friend Malone this morning. Says he hasn’t seen Anderssen for days but we’re watching him too.’

‘Must be expensive, all this surveillance.’

And Nelson had laughed hollowly. ‘It’ll be worth it if we catch him.’

Ruth had taken a taxi to the police station to pick up her car but she hadn’t seen Nelson. The desk sergeant had told her that he was out ‘following up on information received’. She wondered if that meant he had found Erik. She had almost left Nelson’s jacket for him at the police station but something made her keep it with her. The jacket reminded her of Nelson and, in some strange way, made her feel braver. Besides, it was very warm.

As she turns into New Road it is four o’clock. Ominous grey clouds are gathering over the sea. A storm is on its way. The wind has suddenly dropped and the air is heavy with expectancy. There is a livid yellow line on the horizon and even the birds are still.

As she lets herself into her house, Flint greets her hysterically. God, she had forgotten him last night. In the kitchen he has tipped over his biscuits and torn a hole in the cardboard. He looks at her balefully as she fills up his bowl. She’ll have to take him with her to her parents. She can’t face asking David again and she doesn’t know how long she’ll be away. She goes up to the attic to get his travelling basket and, as she does so, she hears the first distant rumble of thunder.

She packs quickly, throwing in tops and trousers and jumpers. No point in worrying about what to take, her mother will criticise it all anyway. Ruth is still wearing the jacket. She’ll tell her mother that policeman chic is all the rage in Norfolk. She adds a detective novel and her laptop. She might as well try to get some work done. She drags her suitcase onto the landing, knocking over the cardboard cut-out of Bones as she does so. Beam me up Scotty. Pushing Bones aside, she hurries downstairs. Five o’clock.

Damn, it will be midnight before she gets to London at this

rate. And the roads will be hell. She looks out of the window. It is pitch black now and the wind has started up again. Her gate is swinging wildly to and fro as if an invisible child is playing on it. Hastily, she grabs Flint and shoves him (protesting) into the cat basket. She must hurry up.

And yet, despite everything, she finds herself going to her desk for one last look at the Iron Age torque which started the whole thing. She doesn't know why she does this. She should have given the torque to Phil to put with the other finds but, for some reason, she can't bear to let it go.

It gleams dully in her hand, the twisted metal somehow both sinister and beautiful. Why was it put into the grave? To show the status of the dead girl or as an offering to the gods of the underworld and of the crossing places – the gods who guard the entry onto the marshlands?

For a full minute, Ruth stands there, weighing the heavy gold object in her hand.

Then a voice says informatively, 'Around seventy BC, I think. The time of the Iceni.'

It is Erik.

CHAPTER 26

Ruth swings round, heart hammering. At the same moment a particularly violent blast of wind throws itself against the house. The storm has arrived.

‘A rough night,’ says Erik in a conversational voice. He is wearing a black raincoat and is carrying an umbrella which has obviously just blown inside out. He throws the umbrella aside and steps forward, smiling.

‘Erik,’ she says stupidly.

‘Hello Ruth,’ says Erik. ‘Did you think I would leave without saying goodbye?’

Erik takes a step closer. He’s still smiling but his blue eyes are cold. As cold as the North Sea.

‘The police are looking for you,’ says Ruth.

‘I know,’ he smiles. ‘But they won’t look here.’

Why hadn’t Nelson thought to guard this house, thinks Ruth in despair. But he thinks she is safely on her way to her parents. There’s no-one to help her. She starts to back towards the door.

‘What’s wrong, Ruthie? Don’t you trust me?’

‘No.’

‘I didn’t kill them, you know.’ He picks up the torque and examines it closely. ‘I didn’t kill those little girls. I’m not a Nix. I’m not an evil sea spirit. I’m just Erik.’

His voice is as hypnotic as ever. Ruth shakes her head to clear it. She mustn’t be taken in.

‘You wrote the letters. The letters told me where to find Scarlet.’

‘Rubbish,’ says Erik. ‘You twisted the facts to suit your theory just as all academics do.’

‘Aren’t you an academic?’

‘Me?’ Erik smiles. ‘No. I am a teller of tales. A weaver of mysteries.’

He is, she understands suddenly, quite mad.

Slowly, she moves towards the door. Her hand is touching the handle. Then Flint, realising that he is about to be left behind in his cat basket, sets up an unearthly yowl. Erik starts and jumps towards Ruth. What he means to do she doesn’t know, but one

look at his eyes decides her. She throws herself through the door and out into the night.

The wind is so strong that she can hardly stay upright. It is coming directly from the sea, racing across the marshes, flattening everything in its path. Rain beats against her face, trying to force her back to Erik but she stumbles on. At last she reaches her car. Her trusty, rusty Renault. Madly, she scrabbles at the door.

‘Looking for these?’ She looks round and there is Erik holding up her car keys. He is still smiling. With his white hair flattened by the rain, he looks like a wizard. Not a comfortable Harry Potter wizard but a creature from the wind and the rain. An elemental.

Ruth runs. She darts across New Road, jumps over the ditch – already full of rushing water – that leads to the marshes and sets out into the dark.

‘Ruth!’ She can hear Erik behind her. He too is across the ditch and she can hear him stumbling over the coarse grass and low bushes. Ruth stumbles too, falling heavily on the muddy ground, grazing her hands on loose stones. But she keeps going, panting, gasping, weaving through the stunted trees, with no idea where she’s going except that she must escape from Erik. He will kill her, she knows. He’ll kill her just as he killed those two little girls. For no reason. For the reason that he is mad.

She can hear him behind her. Despite his age, he’s fit, much fitter than her. But desperation drives her on. She falls into a shallow stream and knows she must be getting near the tidal salt marshes. The wind is even louder now and the rain stings her face. She stops. Where is Erik? She can’t hear anything now except the wind.

Exhausted, she sinks down on the ground. It is soft and reed stalks brush against her face. Where is the sea? She mustn’t wander onto the mudflats or that will be the end of her. The tide comes in like a galloping horse, David said. It is easy to imagine wildly galloping hooves in the noise of the wind, the white horses of the waves storming in across the marshes. She crouches amongst the reeds, trying to gather her wits about her. She must ring Nelson, get help, but, as she scrambles for her mobile, she realises that she has packed it in her bag. The wind screams around her and in the background she hears another, even more

sinister, noise. A roaring, rushing, relentless sound.

She is lost on the Saltmarsh and the tide is coming in.

CHAPTER 27

Nelson's mood is dark as he drives back to the station. The so-called 'information received' has turned out to be a load of bollocks. A man answering Erik Anderssen's description had been spotted at a King's Lynn pub. But when Nelson arrived at the pub it turned out to be folk music night, which meant that every man in the place answered to Erik Anderssen's description, grey pony-tail, smug expression and all.

He glowers out at the rain as he edges through the Sunday night traffic. Then he thinks, sod it, and puts on his siren. The traffic parts for him in a way that he never ceases to find satisfying as he heads back to the station.

Christ, he hopes Ruth is OK. Still, she should be safely on her way to London now. Not that he thinks Erik will try to contact her. Privately, he's sure that he has already left the country, leapt on a late flight last night and is happily on the way to ... where's a place in Norway? Oslo, that's it. He'll be sitting in a café in Oslo now, drinking whatever Norwegians drink and laughing his bearded head off.

The desk sergeant tells him that Ruth collected her car an hour ago. Nelson frowns. That's too late for his liking. Whatever was she doing, hanging about all day? He'd spoken to her at lunchtime, she should have left straight away.

At his office door he is stopped by a WPC. He doesn't know her name but he composes his face into something like a smile. She is young (they get younger all the time) and looks nervous.

'Er ... there's someone to see you, Detective Chief Inspector.'

'Yes?' he says encouragingly.

'He's in your office. He wouldn't leave a name.'

Why the hell hadn't he been stopped downstairs, thinks Nelson irritably. He pushes open the door and the first thing he sees is a swirl of purple cloak. He shuts the door behind him, very quickly indeed.

Cathbad is sitting, quite at his ease, on Nelson's side of the desk. He had his feet, encased in muddy trainers, actually on the desk. Nelson can see mud on one of his beautiful clean 'to do' lists.

‘Get your feet off my desk!’ he bellows.

‘You really must watch that anger, Detective Chief Inspector,’ says Cathbad. ‘I’m sure you must have Aries rising.’ But he takes his feet off the desk.

‘Now get out of my chair,’ says Nelson, breathing heavily.

‘We own nothing in this world,’ counters Cathbad, getting up fairly quickly all the same.

‘Did you just come here to spout New Age rubbish at me?’

‘No,’ says Cathbad calmly. ‘I’ve come to give you some information about Erik Anderssen. I thought I would bring the news in person so I slipped out when your two ... er ... guards were otherwise occupied.’

Nelson’s hands clench into fists as he thinks of the officers sent to watch Cathbad. They’ve made a fine job of surveillance. What the hell were they doing? Sheltering in their car probably, unwilling to face a cold night on the beach in Blakeney. Goons!

‘What information? If you’ve come to tell me he’s at a folk music gig you’re wasting your breath.’

Cathbad ignores this. ‘Erik telephoned me an hour ago. He told me that he was on his way to see Ruth Galloway.’

Nelson’s heart starts to beat faster but he forces himself to speak calmly. ‘Why are you so keen to help the police all of a sudden?’

‘I dislike the police,’ says Cathbad loftily, ‘but I abhor all forms of violence. Erik sounded distinctly violent to me. I think your friend Doctor Galloway could be in danger.’

*

Ruth lies in the reed bed, listening to the roar of the tide and the howling of the wind and thinks, what the hell am I going to do now? She can’t go back to the house and every moment that she stays on the Saltmarsh adds to the danger. Soon the tide will come in and she has no idea if she is already on the tidal mudflats. But Ruth has no intention of cowering in the mud, waiting to die. She has to find a way out; at any rate she may as well run as lie here waiting for Erik to catch her. She starts to zigzag through the reeds, head down against the wind.

A mighty crack of thunder almost throws her off her feet. It’s a deafening, industrial sound, like two express trains colliding.

Immediately, another lightning blast turns the sky white. Christ, the storm must be right overhead. Is she going to be struck by lightning? Another explosion of thunder sends her, instinctively, down amongst the reeds with her arms over her head. She is lying in a shallow stream. This is dangerous. Water conducts electricity, doesn't it? She can't even remember if she is wearing rubber soles. She edges forward on her stomach. This is how she imagines the First World War; face down in the mud while mortar shells explode into the sky. And this is no-man's-land alright. Hand over hand, she crawls slowly forward.

*

Jaw clenched, Nelson drives like a maniac towards the Saltmarsh. Next to him, humming softly, sits Cathbad. There is no-one whose company Nelson desires less, but there are two important reasons why Cathbad is currently occupying the passenger seat of Nelson's Mercedes. One, he claims to know the Saltmarsh 'like the back of his hand', and two, Nelson does not trust him to be out of his sight for a second.

Clough and Judy are following in a marked police car. Both cars have their sirens blaring but there is little traffic as they scorch through the country lanes. The storm, raging unnoticed above them, has driven everyone inside.

At New Road, Nelson recognises Ruth's car and his breathing eases a little. Then he sees the open door swinging in the wind and he feels his heart contract. When he enters the sitting room, however, his heart almost jumps out of his chest. Because the room is filled with a terrible, unearthly wailing. He stops dead and Cathbad cannons into the back of him.

To Nelson's eternal shame it is Cathbad who notices the cat basket and goes to rescue Flint.

'Go free, little cat,' he murmurs vaguely. Flint doesn't need telling twice. Tail fluffed up in outrage, he disappears through the open front door. Nelson hopes that he hasn't gone forever. He doesn't want another of Ruth's cats meeting a sticky end.

By the time Clough and Judy arrive, Nelson has already searched the tiny cottage. There is no sign of Erik or Ruth though a packed suitcase sits by the door and a broken umbrella, like a prehistoric bird, has been thrown onto the floor. Cathbad is

examining a crumbled piece of metal which was lying on the table.

‘What’s that?’ asks Nelson.

‘Looks like an Iron Age torque,’ replies Cathbad. ‘Full of magic.’

Nelson loses interest immediately. ‘They can’t have gone far,’ he says. ‘Johnson, Clough, go and ask the neighbours if they heard anything. Radio for some dogs and an armed response team. You and me’ – he grasps Cathbad’s arm – ‘we’re going for a little walk on the Saltmarsh.’

*

Bent double, Ruth is running across the Saltmarsh. Falling headlong into muddy streams, clawing herself out, tasting blood in her mouth, getting up again and falling again, this time into a pond about a foot deep. Spluttering, she staggers to her feet. The marsh is full of water like this, some stretches several feet wide. She retraces her steps, finds some firmer ground and starts running again.

On she runs; she has lost a shoe and her trousers are ripped to pieces. Thank God though for the police jacket, which has, at least, kept her top half dry. She must keep going, she owes it to Nelson if no-one else. It really would finish his career if another body was found on the marshes. She pulls the coat more tightly round her and, as she does so, she feels a faint, a very faint, glow of courage, as if it is being transferred to her via the coat. Nelson wouldn’t be scared by a bit of wind and rain, now would he?

But where is Nelson? And, more to the point, where is Erik? She stops, tries to listen but she can hear only the wind and the rain and the thunder. *What the thunder said.* Isn’t that T.S. Eliot? For a second she thinks of the letters, of Erik and Shona quoting T.S. Eliot to taunt Nelson. She can believe this, though it makes her sad, but does she really believe that Erik killed Scarlet Henderson? Does she really believe that he would kill her? Trust no-one, she tells herself, staggering onwards over the uneven ground. Trust no-one but yourself.

Then she hears a sound which makes her heart stop. A voice like no human voice she has ever heard. It is as if the dead themselves are calling her. Three calls, low and even, the last shuddering away into silence. What the hell was that?

The call comes again, this time from very close by. For no reason that she knows, she starts to move towards it and suddenly finds herself facing a solid wall.

She can't believe it at first. But it is, unmistakably, a wall. Gingerly, she puts out a hand to touch it. No, it isn't a mirage. It is a solid wall, wood, made of rough boards nailed together.

Of course, it's the hide! She has reached the hide. She almost laughs out loud in her relief. This must be the furthest hide, the one where she and Peter met David that day. But that hide, she remembers, is above the tidal mark. She is safe. She can shelter inside until the storm passes. Oh, thank God for bird watchers.

Half-drunk with relief, she staggers into the hut. It's open on one side so it doesn't offer brilliant shelter but it's a great deal better than nothing. It is wonderful to be out of the wind and the rain. Her face aches as if she has been repeatedly slapped and her ears are still ringing. She rests her head against the rough wood wall and closes her eyes. It's crazy but she could almost go to sleep.

Outside the storm is still raging but she has almost become used to it. Now the wind sounds like children's voices calling. How sad they sound, like the cries of sailors lost at sea, like the will o'the wisps searching the world for comfort and warmth. Ruth shivers. She mustn't get spooked now and start thinking about Erik's fireside tales. About the long green fingers reaching up out of the water, about the undead creatures roaming the night, about the drowned cities, the church bells ringing deep below the sea ...

She jumps. She has heard a cry coming from beneath her feet. She listens again. For a moment, the storm is still and she hears it again. Unmistakably a human voice. 'Help me! Help me!'

Stupidly Ruth looks at the wooden floor of the hide. It is covered by a carpet of rush matting. She tears at the carpet. It is obviously pinned down but comes away after the third or fourth tug. Below are floorboards and a trapdoor. Why on earth would there be a trapdoor in a bird-watching hide? And there is the voice again. Calling from beneath the floor.

Hardly knowing what she is doing, Ruth bends down and puts her face to the trapdoor.

'Who's there?' she calls.

There is a silence and then a voice answers, 'It's me.'

The simplicity of this response strikes Ruth to the heart. It presupposes that Ruth knows the owner of the voice. And, almost at once, she feels as if she does.

‘Don’t worry,’ she shouts, ‘I’m coming.’

There is a bolt on the trapdoor. It slides back easily as if it is used regularly. Ruth opens the door and peers down in the darkness. At the same time a flash of lightning illuminates the surroundings.

A face looks back up at her. A girl, a teenager perhaps, painfully thin with long, matted hair. She’s wearing a man’s jumper and tattered trousers and has a blanket round her shoulders.

‘What are you doing here?’ asks Ruth stupidly.

The girl just shakes her head. Her eyes are huge, her skin grey with pallor.

‘What’s your name?’ asks Ruth.

But, all of a sudden, she knows.

‘Lucy,’ she says gently. ‘You’re Lucy, aren’t you?’

CHAPTER 28

Judy and Clough report that there is no response from either of Ruth's neighbours.

'Houses look shut up, Sir.' Nelson tells them to stay and wait for the dog handlers. He will search on the Saltmarsh.

'In this?' says Clough, gesturing towards the dark expanse of the marsh, where the trees are almost blown flat by the wind. 'You'll never find them.'

'There's quicksand,' says Judy, as a particularly savage blast almost knocks her off her feet. 'And the tide comes in really quickly. I used to live around here. It's not safe.'

'I know a way,' says Cathbad.

They all look at him. His cloak is flying out in the wind, his eyes are bright. Somehow he doesn't look quite as ridiculous as usual.

'There's a hidden way,' Cathbad goes on. 'I discovered it ten years ago. It's a sort of shingle spit. It leads from the lowest hide right up to the henge circle. Solid ground all the way.'

That must have been the path Ruth took to find Scarlet's body, thinks Nelson. 'Can you find it in the dark?' he asks.

'Trust me,' says Cathbad.

Which none of them finds very reassuring.

*

The sound of her name seems to have a devastating effect on the girl. She starts to cry loudly. A child crying rather than a teenage girl.

'Let me out!' she sobs. 'Oh please, let me out.'

'I will,' says Ruth grimly.

She reaches down and grabs the girl's arm. It feels brittle, as if it might snap. Then she hauls but she is not strong enough to take the girl's weight, skinny as she is. Oh, why hadn't she kept going to the gym?

'I'm coming down,' she says at last. 'Then I'll give you a leg up.'

The girl backs away but Ruth is determined. She jumps in through the trapdoor and falls heavily onto the concrete floor

below. The girl is standing against the opposite wall, her teeth bared like an animal at bay. In her hand she holds a stone. A flint, decides Ruth, giving it a sharp, professional look. A sharp one.

Ruth tries a smile. 'Hello,' she says. 'Hello Lucy. I'm Ruth.'

The girl lets out a small, frightened sound but doesn't move.

Ruth looks around. She is in a small, square, underground dungeon. Looking up, she sees the trapdoor in the ceiling, and a barred window which also has a wooden cover. The room is empty apart from a low bed, a bucket and a plastic box which seems to contain a baby's toys. The walls and the floor are all concrete, rough in places, and there is moisture running down the walls. The whole place smells of damp and urine and fear.

My God, thinks Ruth in horror, has Erik really kept her a prisoner all this time? What about when he was in Norway? Cathbad, that must be the answer. This is the link between Erik and Cathbad. Cathbad is his jailer.

And now they must escape. Ruth turns to the girl, who is still cowering against the wall.

'Come on.' She holds out her hand again. 'I'm going to help you get out of here.'

But the girl, Lucy, just whimpers and shakes her head.

'Come on, Lucy,' says Ruth, trying to keep her voice as calm and gentle as possible. Trying to make it sound as if they have all the time in the world and there isn't a madman on their trail and a raging tempest outside. 'Come on. I'll take you home. You'd like to go home, wouldn't you, Lucy? See your mum and dad?'

She'd expected Lucy to react to the words mum and dad but the girl is still looking terrified. Ruth edges slowly towards her, dredging her mind for every soothing platitude she can think of.

'There, there. It's OK. Don't worry. It'll be alright.'

What were some of the meaningless things her mother used to say to her? Annoying little catchphrases but nevertheless as soothing as a cup of cocoa when you can't sleep. Ruth has never had children so it is her own childhood she must conjure up. Remember the days when her mother was not just someone who annoyed her on the phone, but the most important person in the world. The litany of motherhood.

'Don't worry. No use crying over spilt milk. Never get well if you pick it. Tears before bedtime. Tomorrow's another day. All's

well that ends well. It's just a phase. Don't cry. It's darkest before dawn.'

And, as if the last words are the magic spell that releases the princess from the tower, Lucy throws herself into Ruth's arms.

*

Nelson drives Cathbad to the car park in silence. The only sounds are the overloaded windscreen wipers swishing to and fro and Nelson's fingers drumming impatiently on the steering wheel. Perhaps fortunately for his continued well-being, Cathbad does not comment on this typically Scorpio impatience.

The trees around the car park are blown into a frenzy. The boarded-up kiosk looms eerily out of the dark, promising ghostly Cornettos and Calippo Shots. Grimly, Nelson gets a rope and a heavy-duty torch out of the boot. Cathbad hums serenely.

They walk up the gravel track to the first hide. Nelson is in the lead, shining the torch in front of him. He doesn't think of himself as imaginative, but the noise of the wind howling across the marshes is starting to give him the creeps. The thunder rumbling overhead just adds to the clichéd horror film atmosphere. Behind him Cathbad sighs with what sounds like happiness.

They pass the first hide and Cathbad pushes in front.

'The path,' he says calmly. 'It's near here.'

Nelson hands him the torch. If they get lost he will kill Cathbad first and arrest him afterwards.

After a few yards, Cathbad veers off the gravel track and starts to head out over the marsh. Despite the torch, it's pitch black. Here and there, Nelson can see glimpses of water, dark and dangerous. It's like walking into the unknown, like one of those ridiculous trust exercises they make you do on police training courses. Except that Nelson doesn't trust Cathbad, not one little bit. Following Ruth across the marshes, even in the daylight, had been difficult enough. It takes all his self-control now not to elbow Cathbad out of the way and insist on turning back to the track.

Suddenly Cathbad stops. 'Here it is,' he murmurs. Nelson sees him shine the torch onto the ground. A bolt of lightning turns the sky white. Cathbad grins at him. 'Follow me,' he says.

About a mile away, across the black marshland, Ruth holds Lucy in her arms. It feels strange, cuddling this thin, vulnerable body. Ruth doesn't know many teenagers and those she does know are hardly likely to fling their arms around her and sob into her shoulder.

'There, there,' says Ruth in her mythical mother persona. 'It'll be alright. Come on, Lucy.'

But Lucy just cries and cries, her entire body shaken with the force of her sobbing.

'Come on,' Ruth is forced to say at last. 'Come on. Before *he* gets back.'

That does the trick alright. Lucy breaks away, her eyes round with fear.

'Is he coming?' she whispers.

'I don't know,' says Ruth. Who knows where Erik is? Hopefully he is lost out there on the dark marshes but, knowing Erik, he probably has a sea sprite's sixth sense that will allow him to walk unharmed through the storm and arrive just as they are trying to escape. She doesn't say this to Lucy though. Taking advantage of the girl's loosened grip, she propels her gently below the trapdoor.

'I'm going to give you a leg up. You know,' she adds desperately, 'like on a pony.' She has never ridden a pony but she is hoping that Lucy has.

'A pony,' Lucy repeats carefully.

'Yes. I'm going to push you up through that hole and then climb up myself. OK?' she finishes brightly.

Almost imperceptibly, Lucy nods.

'Put your arms up,' says Ruth. Lucy does so. Clearly she is used to obeying orders. In the event Ruth does not give her a leg up, instead she clasps Lucy round the waist and lifts her. It is surprisingly easy. Either Lucy weighs almost nothing or Ruth has developed superhuman strength. To her amazement, Lucy grasps the edge of the trapdoor and deftly swings herself up. Then she peers down at Ruth, her lips curved in something like a smile.

'Well done, Lucy! Well done!' She is so elated that she has almost forgotten that she has still got to get herself up.

Desperately, Ruth looks around for something to climb on. She

spots the plastic box of toys and pulls it over to the space below the trapdoor. She stands on top. Still not high enough. So she gets the bucket, tipping its pungent-smelling contents into the corner, and puts it upside-down on top of the box. Now she balances precariously on the bucket. Yes! She is able to grab the rim of the trapdoor. Then, using every ounce of superhuman strength, she struggles to pull herself up. Her fingers scrabble madly on the hide's wooden floor and, amazingly, she feels something else pulling determinedly at her hand. It is Lucy. Lucy trying to help her. Whether or not this makes the difference, suddenly her torso is up through the trapdoor. One final heave and her legs are up too. Ruth lies panting on the floor of the hide.

Lucy is watching her. When she leans forward, her voice is again that breathy little whisper.

‘Are we going home?’

‘Yes.’ Ruth struggles to her feet and takes Lucy’s hand. She can hear the rain drumming on the roof but the thunder seems to have stopped. She looks at Lucy’s thin, shivering body. How is she ever going to get her home? Ruth takes off the policeman’s jacket and wraps it around Lucy. It comes to below her knees.

‘There,’ she says in her bright ‘mother’ voice. ‘Now you’ll be fine.’

But Lucy is looking beyond her. Staring at the entrance to the hide. She has heard something and now Ruth hears it too. Footsteps. A man’s footsteps. Coming quickly towards them.

CHAPTER 29

Purple cloak flying out behind him, Cathbad leads the way across the marshes. Occasionally he stops and shines the torch at the ground and then he turns slightly to the right or left. Nelson follows. He feels his jaw locked with frustration, but he has to admit that, so far, Cathbad hasn't put a foot wrong. On either side of them he can see still water and dark, treacherous marshland but their feet remain on the twisting stony path. Thunder is rolling above them, the rain beats down unmercifully. Nelson is soaked but none of this matters if they find Ruth.

It is so dark that sometimes he almost loses sight of Cathbad, though he is only a few paces in front. Then he sees a glimmer of purple and realises that the old nutter is still there. Once or twice, Cathbad turns to him, grinning manically.

'Cosmic energy,' he says.

Nelson ignores him.

Where the hell is Ruth? And Erik? Whatever possessed Ruth to go running off like that, chasing over the marshes on the worst night of the year? Nelson sighs. When he thinks of Ruth, a kind of reluctant tenderness constricts his throat. He thinks of her lists, her love for her cats, her refusal to drink station coffee, the calm way she can dig through layers of mud and come up with a priceless treasure. He thinks of the way she fed him coffee and listened, the night Scarlet was found. He thinks of her body, actually rather magnificent unclothed, white in the moonlight. He thinks of her at Scarlet's funeral, her eyes red, and of her face when she told him that Erik was the author of the letters. He sighs again, almost a groan. He's not in love with Ruth but somehow she gets to him. If anything happens to her, he will never forgive himself.

Cathbad stops again and Nelson almost bumps into him.

'What's the matter?' He has to shout to be heard above the wind.

'I've lost the path.'

'You're joking!'

Cathbad sweeps the beam of the torch over the ground.

'Some of the posts are submerged ...' he mutters. 'I think this is

it.'

He takes a step forward and disappears. He doesn't even have time to scream. He just vanishes, swallowed up by the night. Nelson jumps forward and is just in time to catch a handful of cloak. He pulls, the cloak tears, but now he has got hold of Cathbad's arm. Cathbad is up to his neck in the mud and it takes all Nelson's strength to haul him out. Finally, with a ghastly sucking noise, the marsh relinquishes its prey. Cathbad kneels on the path, head down, panting. He is completely covered in mud, his cloak in tatters.

Nelson yanks him to his feet. 'Come on, Cathbad, you're not dead yet.' It is the first time he has called Malone by his adopted name, but neither of them notices this.

Cathbad grasps Nelson's arm, his eyes look white and wild in his blackened face. 'I am in your debt,' he says, fighting for breath. 'The spirits of the ancestors are strong, they are all about us.'

'Well, we're not about to join them yet,' Nelson tells him briskly. 'Where's that torch?'

*

Ruth and Lucy stare at each other, terrified. The footsteps are coming nearer. Ruth's mind works frantically. They are trapped, they can't leave the hide without Erik catching them. Unconsciously Ruth moves in front of Lucy. Will Erik attack them both? How can she defend herself, defend Lucy? She looks wildly around the hide but it is completely empty. If only she had a stone or a piece of wood. Where is the stone that Lucy was carrying?

The footsteps come nearer and, at the same moment, the moon slides out from behind the clouds. A man's figure approaches, wearing yellow waterproofs. Hang on, wasn't Erik in black? The man reaches the steps to the hide and, in the moonlight, Ruth sees his face.

It isn't Erik. It is David.

'David!' shouts Ruth. 'Thank God!' David has come to save her again. David, who knows every step of the marshes. David who, she realises, is the only person who really loves the place. She feels giddy with relief.

But, behind her, Lucy starts to scream.

*

Nelson hears the scream. He grabs Cathbad's arm.

'Where did that come from?'

Cathbad points over to the right. 'From over there,' he says vaguely.

'Come on.' Nelson sets out, running, staggering over the waterlogged ground.

'No!' shouts Cathbad. 'You're off the path.'

But Nelson keeps running.

*

Lucy screams and, in that second, Ruth understands everything.

'You!' She stares at David. 'It was you.'

David looks calmly back at her. He looks no different from the kind, diffident, slightly eccentric David she thought she knew. Christ, she had even, for a minute or two, almost fancied him.

'Yes,' he says. 'Me.'

'You killed Scarlet? You kept Lucy a prisoner here for all these years?'

David's face clouds. 'I didn't mean to kill Scarlet. I brought her as company for Lucy. Lucy was growing up. I wanted a younger one. But she struggled. I tried to make her be quiet and ... she died. I didn't mean to do it. I buried her in the sacred place. Erik told me it was the right thing to do.'

'Erik? So he knew about this?'

David shakes his head. 'He didn't know but he talked to me, all those years ago, about burial places and sacrifices. He told me that in prehistoric times they buried children on the marshland, as an offering to the Gods. So I buried Scarlet where the wooden circle used to be. But you dug her up again.' His face darkens.

'You killed my cat,' bursts out Ruth. She knows she shouldn't mention Sparky, she shouldn't be antagonising David, but she can't help herself.

'Yes. I hate cats. They kill birds.'

He takes a step closer. Ruth grabs hold of Lucy, who is shaking violently.

'Keep away from her.'

‘Oh, I can’t let you go now,’ says David, in a sweet, reasonable voice. ‘She’d never survive in the wild. She’s been in captivity too long. I’ll have to kill you both.’

And then Ruth sees that he is holding a knife, a very serious-looking knife. The moonlight gleams on the jagged blade.

‘Run!’ she yells and, dragging Lucy after her, she sprints past David and into the night.

CHAPTER 30

Holding Lucy's hand tightly, Ruth runs. She doesn't know where she is going, she doesn't give a thought to the tide or the marshes, she hardly notices the wind and the rain, all she knows is that they are running for their lives. A murderer is after them, a man who has killed once before and who is intent on silencing them. Beside her, Lucy runs surprisingly well, hardly making a sound. Ruth hangs grimly onto her hand. She mustn't let Lucy go. Alone, in the dark, on the tidal marsh, she would have no chance at all.

Ruth can hear David behind them. He is wading through the stream they have just crossed. She must change direction, head for home. But where is home? She makes a random left turn and finds herself facing a pool of water. She runs on and finds the ground getting softer and softer. Oh God, she must be on the mudflats. She has a sudden vision of Peter, ten years ago, calling for help as the tide advanced. Erik had saved him but he is not going to save Ruth.

And then she hears something. Almost as if Erik's voice is coming back to her, over the years. She stops, listening. It sounds almost like 'Police'. She must be hallucinating.

But it was a mistake to stop. With horrifying suddenness, David's face suddenly looms out of the dark. Ruth screams and Lucy breaks free.

'Lucy!' yells Ruth.

David lunges forward, grabbing Ruth's foot. She kicks out. He falls back. Ruth takes to her heels again; she must find Lucy before David does.

But David is right behind her. She can hear his ragged breathing; hear the splashing as he wades through the pool. Frantically, Ruth turns and finds herself scrambling up a sandy slope. A sand dune. She must be right near the sea but she barely has time to think this when she is falling down the other side of the dune and landing in water. Salt water. Looking ahead, she can see nothingness. Only the ink-black sea, flecked with white foam, coming relentlessly towards her. She turns and wades inland, along a narrow channel of water. Where's Lucy? She must

find Lucy.

Ahead of her, she can see a square dark shape in the water. She heads for it and sees what it is. A Second World War pill box, a small brick structure about a metre high. They are dotted all over the marshes. For want of anything better to do, she climbs on top of the box. If she jumps, she can reach the higher ground, where she should be safe from the tide. She jumps and lands heavily on the opposite bank. A brief thrill of elation runs through her. She has done it! Super Ruth!

But then the elation vanishes. Standing over her, knife in hand, is David.

*

Nelson runs across the salt marsh. He hardly notices that he falls many times, staggering in and out of the water. Behind him he can hear Cathbad shouting something about the tide but he ignores him. Someone is screaming. Ruth is in danger.

‘Police!’ he yells. ‘Freeze!’

He hasn’t even got a gun, what’s he going to do when he gets there? He doesn’t think about that, just runs doggedly on.

And then he sees the solid shape of the hide, looming up out of the featureless darkness. He runs towards it.

The hide is deserted, eerie in the moonlight. Nelson climbs the steps and looks down into the dark hole left by the trapdoor. Thank God he took the torch from Cathbad. Its bright beam illuminates the underground room.

‘Jesus,’ breathes Nelson.

*

‘Sorry Ruth,’ says David, again sounding quite normal, the shy helpful neighbour who had looked after her cat and to whom (Oh God!) she had given her mobile phone number.

‘David ...’ Ruth croaks.

‘I have to kill you,’ explains David, ‘now you know about Lucy.’

‘Why did you do it?’ asks Ruth. She genuinely wants to know the truth, even though she knows it might be the last thing she hears.

‘Why?’ asks David, surprised. ‘For company, of course.’

He moves towards her, holding out the knife. Ruth backs away,

wondering what her chances are. They are standing on a raised bank, behind David is the pool she passed earlier. She has no idea how deep it is. Even if she manages to get past him, she can hardly swim across the water in the dark. Behind her are the sand dunes and the sea crashing relentlessly forwards. She is exhausted and overweight; she knows David would catch her easily. She opens her mouth to say something. To beg for mercy? She doesn't know. But, then, another noise fills the night. Three echoing calls, harsh and even. It is the sound that she heard earlier, beside the hide. David looks at Ruth, his face is transfixed.

'Did you hear that?' he whispers.

Without waiting for an answer, he turns his back and starts walking away from her, towards the sound. It comes again. Calling, calling across the black marshes. Is it the voice of a dead child? The will o'the wisps? At this moment, Ruth will believe anything. She too starts to move towards the sound.

What happens next is like a dream. Or a nightmare. Moving as if hypnotised, David walks straight into the pool. He is waist deep but does not even seem to notice. Ruth sees his yellow jacket moving steadily through the inky water. Then, the clouds move and Ruth sees a figure on the opposite bank. A figure wearing a dark jacket that comes to below its knees. Lucy. There is something in her stance, something poised and purposeful, that is almost terrifying. Suddenly Ruth has no doubt that it is Lucy who is making the strange, unearthly call.

David, though, is beyond thought. He walks on through the water, head up, pulled as if on invisible strings. And then, so suddenly that no-one has time to cry out, a huge white-edged wave comes crashing over the sandbank and into the pool. David loses his balance and disappears under the water. Another wave follows, turning the pool into a cauldron of foamy water. Ruth feels spray on her face and shuts her eyes. When she opens them again, the pool is still and David has vanished.

Now Ruth screams but she knows no-one can hear her. She knows too that there is nothing anyone can do for David and is surprised at the strength of her impulse to save him. It seems that even the death of a murderer can provoke pity.

Another figure appears on the opposite bank. A tall, thick-set figure. Nelson. He is shouting something but Ruth can't make out the words. She starts to make her way towards him, around the

edge of the pool. As she does so, the sky is filled with a sound like the beating of enormous wings. A police helicopter appears overhead, its rotors churning up the black waters. It circles the pool and then heads out to sea. The water is still once more.

On hands and knees, Ruth crawls along the shingle bank on the south side of the pool. It is further than it looks and she is beyond exhausted. The sound of the helicopter fades away and now she can hear human voices and, in the distance, dogs barking.

By the time she has reached the far bank, the police dogs have arrived. Actual bloodhounds, straining at their leashes and uttering low, booming barks that seem to come from another century. Ruth reaches Nelson just as he is looking, with dawning wonder, into the face of the girl next to him.

‘Nelson,’ says Ruth, ‘meet Lucy Downey.’

CHAPTER 31

Ruth is walking along the sand. It is early March and although the wind is cold there is a faint promise of spring in the air. She is barefoot and the clam shells cut into her feet.

She is near the henge circle. The sand, rippling like a frozen sea, stretches far in front of her. She thinks of Ozymandias, 'the lone and level sands stretch far away'. There is something grand and terrible about the great expanse of sea and sky, something terrifying, yet at the same time exhilarating. We are nothing, Ruth thinks, nothing to this place. Bronze Age man came here and built the henge, Iron Age man left bodies and votive offerings, modern man tries to tame the sea with walls and towers and bridges. Nothing remains. Man dwindles into dust, less than sand; only the sea and sky stay the same. Yet she walks jauntily, with a spring in her step, stepping lightly over mortality.

She is due to meet Nelson, who is going to give her the latest news of Lucy. This is one legacy of that terrible night, three weeks ago. Ruth feels bound to Lucy and knows that this connection will last forever, whether Lucy wants it or not. Ruth may soon fade in Lucy's mind – indeed, she hopes many things will fade from Lucy's mind; one day she will become just the strange, large lady who comes with presents at Christmas and birthdays, bringing with her a faint memory of a dark night, a wild sea and the end of a nightmare. But for Ruth, that moment when she held Lucy in her arms was a turning point. She knew then that she would do anything to protect Lucy. She knew then what it is to be a mother.

Nelson told her about Lucy's reunion with her actual parents. 'We called them, didn't tell them what was up, just asked them to come to the station. It was four in the morning, God knows what they thought. The mother thought we'd found Lucy's body, I could see it in her eyes. We had a child psychologist standing by; nobody knew what would happen. Would Lucy even recognise her parents? She was very calm, just sat there, huddled in my jacket, as if she was waiting for something. We made her a cup of tea and she screamed. Hadn't expected it to be hot. Probably hadn't had a hot drink for ten years. She screamed and dropped

the drink on the floor, then she cringed away from me, as if she expected me to hit her. That bastard ill-treated her, I'm sure of it. So I left her with Judy. Then, when I came in with the parents ... she made this noise, this little cry, like a baby. Then the mother said, "Lucy?" And Lucy just howled "Mummy!" and flung herself into her arms. Jesus. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. Judy was weeping buckets and Cloughie and I were both sniffing away. But the parents, they hugged her as if they'd never let her go. Then the mother looked at me, over Lucy's head, and said "Thank you." Thank you! Jesus.'

'Will she be alright, do you think?'

'Well, she's obviously seeing an army of psychiatrists but they say she's remarkably resilient. She has to learn to be a teenager, not a little girl. In some ways, they say she's stuck at five years old but, in others, she's amazingly mature. I think she understands a lot more than we give her credit for.'

And Ruth, remembering the way that Lucy had used the bird call (the call, she is sure, of the Long Eared Owl) to lure David to his death, believes him.

They have not found David's body. It must have been washed out to sea and carried by the tide to another shoreline. Perhaps they will never find it and David's remains will one day join the Neolithic bones and relics that lie beneath this shallow sea.

They did find Erik though. The great shaman, who knew the marshes like the back of his hand, had drowned in a marshy pool just a few hundred metres from Ruth's cottage.

Ruth went to Norway for Erik's funeral. Despite everything, she found that she still had some love left for him – and for Magda. Erik had always said that he wanted a Viking's funeral. Ruth remembers him, by the camp fire in full storyteller mode: 'The ship, its sails full in the evening light. The dead man, his sword at his side and his shield on his breast. The flame, that burst of purifying fire that will send him to Valhalla to sit with Odin and Thor until the world is renewed ...' So they had taken his ashes and put them in a wooden boat built specially by Lars, Magda's lover. They had set fire to the boat and sent it sailing out onto the lake, where it burnt all through the night and was still smouldering in the morning.

'You know,' Magda had turned to Ruth, her face lit by the glow from the boat, 'we were happy.'

‘I know,’ said Ruth.

And she did know. Magda and Erik were happy, despite Shona and Lars and all the others. And she, Ruth, still loved Erik, despite the letters and the adultery and the cold light behind the blue eyes. She seemed to have learnt a lot about love over the last few weeks. After Norway, she went home to Eltham where she went shopping with her mother, played scrabble with her father and even attended church with them. She doesn’t think she will ever be a believer herself but these days it does not seem so important to remind her parents of this. Somehow, when she held Lucy in her arms in that terrible cellar, she found a way back to her own mother. Perhaps it is just that she learnt the value of the maternal cliché, the love that is always the same no matter how many years pass and burns no less strongly by being expressed in time-worn phrases.

Erik was never charged with any crime. Cathbad was quietly cleared of the charge of wasting police time. The letters, with their haunting messages of life and death and resurrection, were never made public. Ruth thinks about them sometimes though. Thinks about why Erik and Shona wrote them, why Erik hated Nelson so much that he was prepared to distract him from his job of catching a murderer. Was it grief for James Agar that motivated Erik or was it arrogance, the chance to pit his wits against the police, that embodiment of a philistine state? She will never know.

Cathbad celebrated the dropping of the charges by performing a spiritual cleansing session on the beach, not unlike a Viking funeral, involving much dancing around a ceremonial fire. He invited Nelson but Nelson declined to attend. Despite this, Cathbad and Nelson have become, for want of any other word, friends. Nelson has a reluctant admiration for the way Cathbad remained calm in the storm, guiding him across the deadly marshes. And Cathbad is convinced that Nelson saved his life. He says so on every possible occasion, which somehow Nelson doesn’t dislike as much as he should.

Ruth sees Nelson approaching over the sand dunes. He is wearing jeans and a leather jacket and he looks wary, as if he expects the sand to leap up and attack him. Nelson will never love the Saltmarsh. He always found it a spooky sort of place and now it will always be associated in his mind with Lucy’s long

imprisonment (under the noses of his officers!) and with death.

Nelson has reached Ruth who is standing, she thinks, at the start of the henge circle. There is nothing to show for it now though, just a few blackened streaks on the grey sand. The timbers themselves lie artificially preserved in the museum, far from the wind and the sand.

‘What a place to meet,’ grumbles Nelson, ‘miles from anywhere.’

‘The exercise will do you good,’ says Ruth.

‘You sound like Michelle.’

Ruth has met Michelle now and, to her surprise, quite likes her. She admires the way that Michelle always does exactly what she wants, whilst retaining the image of the perfect wife. This, she feels, is a skill she could usefully learn, not that she is planning to be anyone’s wife. Ruth suspects that Michelle, for her part, is simply dying to give her a make-over.

Peter has gone back to Victoria. Ruth is happy for him, and is also relieved that it was David, not Peter, who sent the text messages. Her memories of him can stay intact.

‘How’s it going?’ Ruth asks.

‘Not too bad. There’s a new corruption scandal brewing which may take the pressure off me for a bit.’

The discovery of Lucy Downey was, of course, a media sensation. There seemed to have been little else in the papers for weeks, which was one reason why Ruth escaped to Norway and Eltham. Nelson came in for his share of criticism; after all, Lucy was found in an area which had been searched many times by the police. But, then again, Nelson did get all the credit for rescuing Lucy. Ruth was more than happy for her part to be downplayed and Cathbad, too, had his own reasons for remaining in the shadows. Also, Lucy’s parents consistently refused to criticise Nelson, saying instead that it was his tireless searching that had eventually resulted in Lucy’s discovery.

‘How’s Lucy?’ asks Ruth as they walk along the sea’s edge. The tide is going out, leaving a line of shells and glistening stones. The seagulls swoop low, looking for treasure.

‘Good,’ says Nelson. ‘I went round there yesterday and she was playing on a swing in the garden. Apparently she remembered the house and the garden perfectly. But she’d forgotten lots of other things. When she first saw a cat, she screamed.’

Ruth thinks of Flint who, fully recovered from his exertions, stayed with Shona while she was away. Shona, desperate to make amends, fed Flint almost entirely on smoked salmon. I should get another cat, Ruth thinks, stop Flint getting too spoilt.

‘Has Lucy said anything about what it was like?’ she asks. ‘When she was locked up?’

‘The psychiatrist has been getting her to draw pictures. The most disturbing things you ever saw. Little black boxes, clutching hands, iron bars.’

‘Was she abused by him? David.’

‘Abused? Of course she was abused. But, sexually, there’s no sign. I think he was quite squeamish about sex, actually. The psychiatrists think that if she’d started menstruating, he might have killed her.’

‘How did he make that underground room? It had concrete walls and everything.’

‘Apparently it was an old Second World War bunker. He built the hide on top of it.’

‘Jesus.’ Ruth is silent for a few minutes, thinking of the preparation that must have gone into creating Lucy’s prison. How many years had David been planning this?

‘Does anyone know why he did it?’

‘The shrinks have got a million theories but it’s all guesswork. Perhaps he wanted birds to be free but liked to keep humans in captivity.’

‘For company, that’s what he said to me.’ Ruth thinks of what David said when she told him of her grief for Sparky; ‘she was company’. With a shiver, she realises that when she and Peter saw him that day he must have been on his way to check up on Lucy. That was why he hated tourists and litter. He wanted everyone to keep away from the hide.

‘Company,’ Nelson grunts. ‘Jesus. Couldn’t he have joined a computer club?’

Why not indeed, thinks Ruth, looking out at the sea. Why does anyone do anything? Why does she remain here, on the Saltmarsh, where so many awful things have happened? Why is Nelson still in love with his wife, although they have nothing in common? Why does Phil still not believe that the henge and the causeway are linked? Why is she fat and Shona thin? There’s no answer to any of it. But, she thinks, smiling to herself as the cold

water foams over her bare feet, somehow none of that matters today. She's happy with her life, here on the desolate coast. She wouldn't change any of it. She likes her job, her friends, her home. And besides, she thinks, smiling even more widely to herself; I'm not fat, I'm pregnant. She has no intention of telling Nelson, though. Not yet.

Nelson too is gazing out to sea. 'What's happened about the Iron Age girl?' he asks suddenly. 'The one who started all this?'

Ruth smiles. 'They're calling her Ruth, you know, after me. I call her the lost girl of the marshes. I'm writing a paper about her.'

'Do you know any more about why she died?'

'Not really. She seems to be from a wealthy family, her nails are manicured and we've done tests on her hair that prove she had good nutrition. But no-one knows why she was tied down on the marsh and left to die. Maybe it was to ensure safe passage over the marsh. Maybe she was an offering to the Gods. But, really, we don't know.'

'Seems to me it's all a lot of guesswork,' says Nelson.

Ruth smiles. 'The questions are more important than the answers.'

'If you say so.'

*

And they turn and walk back towards the dunes.

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The Saltmarsh and its henge are completely imaginary. There was, however, a bronze-age henge found in North Norfolk, at Holme-next-the-Sea. For descriptions of this henge I am indebted to Francis Pryor's marvellous book *Seahenge* (HarperCollins).

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THE JANUS STONE

For my nieces and nephews: Francesca, William, Robert,
Charlotte and Eleanor

1st June

Festival of Carna

The house is waiting. It knows. When I sacrificed yesterday, the entrails were black. Everything is turned to night. Outside it is spring but in the house there is a coldness, a pall of despair that covers everything.

We are cursed. This is no longer a house but a grave. The birds do not sing in the garden and even the sun does not dare penetrate the windows. No one knows how to lift the curse. They have given in and lie as if waiting for death. But I know and the house knows.

Only blood will save us now.

CHAPTER 1

A light breeze runs through the long grass at the top of the hill. Close up, the land looks ordinary, just heather and coarse pasture with the occasional white stone standing out like a signpost. But if you were to fly up above these unremarkable hills you would be able to see circular raised banks and darker rectangles amongst the greens and browns – sure signs that this land has been occupied many, many times before.

Ruth Galloway, walking rather slowly up the hill, does not need the eagle's eye view to know that this is an archaeological site of some importance. Colleagues from the university have been digging on this hill for days and they have uncovered not only evidence of a Roman villa but also of earlier Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements.

Ruth had planned to visit the site earlier but she has been busy marking papers and preparing for the end of term. It is May and the air is sweet, full of pollen and the scent of rain. She stops, getting her breath back and enjoying the feeling of being outdoors on a spring afternoon. The year has been dark so far, though not without unexpected bonuses, and she relishes the chance just to stand still, letting the sun beat down on her face.

'Ruth!' She turns and sees a man walking towards her. He is wearing jeans and a work-stained shirt and he treats the hill with disdain, hardly altering his long stride. He is tall and slim with curly dark hair greying at the temples. Ruth recognises him, as he obviously does her, from a talk he gave at her university several months ago. Dr Max Grey, from the University of Sussex, an archaeologist and an expert on Roman Britain.

'I'm glad you could come,' he says and he actually does look glad. A change from most archaeologists, who resent another expert on their patch. And Ruth is an acknowledged expert – on bones, decomposition and death. She is Head of Forensic Archaeology at the University of North Norfolk.

'Are you down to the foundations?' asks Ruth, following Max to the summit of the hill. It is colder here and, somewhere high above, a skylark sings.

'Yes, I think so,' says Max, pointing to a neat trench in front of

them. Halfway down, a line of grey stone can be seen. 'I think we may have found something that will interest you, actually.'

Ruth knows without being told.

'Bones,' she says.

*

Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson is shouting. Despite a notoriously short fuse at work (at home with his wife and daughters he is a pussy cat) he is not normally a shouter. Brusque commands are more his line, usually delivered on the run whilst moving on to the next job. He is a man of quick decisions and limited patience. He likes doing things: catching criminals, interrogating suspects, driving too fast and eating too much. He does not like meetings, pointless discussions or listening to advice. Above all, he does not like sitting in his office on a fine spring day trying to persuade his new computer to communicate with him. Hence the shouting.

'Leah!' he bellows.

Leah, Nelson's admin assistant (or secretary, as he likes to call her), edges cautiously into the room. She is a delicate, dark girl of twenty-five, much admired by the younger officers. Nelson, though, sees her mainly as a source of coffee and an interpreter of new technology, which seems to get newer and more temperamental every day.

'Leah,' he complains, 'the screen's gone blank again.'

'Did you switch it off?' asks Leah. Nelson has been known to pull out plugs in moments of frustration, once fusing all the lights on the second floor.

'No. Well, once or twice.'

Leah dives beneath the desk to check the connections. 'Seems OK,' she says. 'Press a key.'

'Which one?'

'Surprise me.'

Nelson thumps the space bar and the computer miraculously comes to life, saying smugly, 'Good afternoon, DCI Nelson.'

'Fuck off,' responds Nelson, reaching for the mouse.

'I beg your pardon?' Leah's eyebrows rise.

'Not you,' says Nelson, 'This thing. When I want small talk, I'll ask for it.'

'I assume it's programmed to say good morning,' says Leah equably. 'Mine plays me a tune.'

'Jesus wept.'

'Chief Superintendent Whitcliffe says everyone's got to familiarise themselves with the new computers. There's a training session at four today.'

'I'm busy,' says Nelson without looking up. 'Got a case conference out Swaffham way.'

'Isn't that where they're doing that Roman dig?' asks Leah. 'I saw it on *Time Team*.'

She has her back to Nelson, straightening files on his shelves, and so fails to see the sudden expression of interest on his face.

'A dig? Archaeology?'

'Yes,' says Leah, turning round. 'They've found a whole Roman town there, they think.'

Nelson now bends his head to his computer screen. 'Lots of archaeologists there, are there?'

'Yes. My uncle owns the local pub, the Phoenix, and he says they're in there every night. He's had to double his cider order.'

'Typical,' grunts Nelson. He can just imagine archaeologists drinking cider when everyone knows that bitter's a man's drink. Women archaeologists, though, are another matter.

'I might have a look at the site on my way back,' he says.

'Are you interested in history?' asks Leah disbelievingly.

'Me? Yes, fascinated. Never miss an episode of *Sharpe*.'

'You should be on our pub quiz team then.'

'I get too nervous,' says Nelson blandly, typing in his password with one finger. Nelson1; he's not one for ambiguity. 'Do me a favour, love, make us a cup of coffee would you?'

*

Swaffham is a picturesque market town, the kind Nelson drives through every day without noticing. A few miles outside and you are deep in the country – fields waist high with grass, signposts pointing in both directions at once, cows wandering across the road shepherded by a vacant-looking boy on a quad bike. Nelson is lost in seconds and almost gives up before it occurs to him to ask the vacant youth the way to the Phoenix pub. When in doubt in Norfolk, ask the way to a pub. It turns out to be quite near so

Nelson does a U-turn in the mud, turns into a road that is no more than a track and there it is, a low thatched building facing a high, grassy bank. Nelson parks in the pub car park and, with a heart turn that he does not want to acknowledge as excitement, he recognises the battered red Renault parked across the road, at the foot of the hill. I just haven't seen her for a while, he tells himself, it'll be good to catch up.

He has no idea where to find the dig, or even what it will look like, but he reckons he'll be able to see more from the top of the bank. It's a beautiful evening, the shadows are long on the grass and the air is soft. But Nelson does not notice his surroundings; he is thinking of a bleak coastline, of bodies washed out to sea by a relentless tide, of the circumstances in which he met Ruth Galloway. She had been the forensic archaeologist called in when human bones were found on the Saltmarsh, a desolate spot on the North Norfolk coast. Though those bones had turned out to be over two thousand years old, Ruth had subsequently become involved in a much more recent case, that of a five-year-old girl, abducted, believed murdered. He hasn't seen Ruth since the case ended three months ago.

At the top of the hill all he can see is more hills. The only features of interest are some earthworks in the distance, and two figures walking along the top of a curving bank: one a brown-haired woman in loose, dark clothes, the other a tall man in mud-stained jeans. A cider-drinker, he'll be bound.

'Ruth,' calls Nelson. He can see her smile; she has a remarkably lovely smile, not that he would ever tell her so.

'Nelson!' She looks good too, he thinks, her eyes bright, her cheeks pink with exercise. She hasn't lost any weight though and he realises that he would have been rather disappointed if she had.

'What are you doing here?' asks Ruth. They don't kiss or even shake hands but both are grinning broadly.

'Had a case conference nearby. Heard there was a dig here.'

'What, are you watching *Time Team* now?'

'My favourite viewing.'

Ruth smiles sceptically and introduces her companion. 'This is Dr Max Grey from Sussex University. He's in charge of the dig. Max, this is DCI Nelson.'

The man, Max, looks up in surprise. Nelson himself is aware

that his title sounds incongruous in the golden evening. Crime happens, even here, Nelson tells Max Grey silently. Academics are never keen on the police.

But Dr Grey manages a smile. 'Are you interested in archaeology, DCI Nelson?'

'Sometimes,' says Nelson cautiously. 'Ruth ... Dr Galloway ... and I worked on a case together recently.'

'That affair on the Saltmarsh?' asks Max, his eyes wide.

'Yes,' says Ruth shortly. 'DCI Nelson called me in when he found some bones on the marsh.'

'Turned out to be bloody Stone Age,' says Nelson.

'Iron Age,' corrects Ruth automatically. 'Actually, Nelson, Max found some human bones today.'

'Iron Age?' asks Nelson.

'Roman, we think. They seem to have been buried under the wall of a house. Come and see.' She leads them down the bank and towards the earthworks. Close up, Nelson sees that the land is full of these strange mounds and hills, some curving round, some standing alone like large molehills.

'What are all these bumps?' he asks Max Grey.

'We think they're walls,' replies Max, his face lighting up in the way that archaeologists have when they are about to bore the pants off you. 'You know, we think there was a whole settlement here, we're fairly near the old Roman road but, from the surface, the only signs are some brown lines in the grass, crop marks, that sort of thing.'

Nelson looks back at the smoothly curving bank. He can just about imagine it as a wall but the rest just looks like grass to him.

'This body, you say it's under a wall?'

'Yes. We just dug a trial trench and there it was. We think it's the wall of a villa, quite a sizeable one, by the looks of it.'

'Funny place to find bones, under a wall,' says Nelson.

'They may have been a foundation sacrifice,' says Max.

'What's that?'

'The Celts, and the Romans sometimes, used to bury bodies under walls and doors as offerings to the Gods Janus and Terminus.'

'Terminus?'

'The God of boundaries.'

'I pray to him whenever I go to Heathrow. And the other one?'

‘Janus, God of doors and openings.’

‘So they killed people and stuck their bodies under their houses? Funny sort of luck.’

‘We don’t know if they killed them or if they were dead already,’ says Max calmly, ‘but the bodies are often children’s’.

‘Jesus.’

They have reached the trench which has been covered by a blue tarpaulin. Ruth peels back the covering and kneels on the edge of the trench. Nelson crouches beside her. He sees a neat, rectangular hole (he often wishes that his crime-scene boys were as tidy as archaeologists), the edges sharp and straight. The trench is about a metre deep and Nelson can see a clear cross-section of the layers as the topsoil gives way to clay and then chalk. Below the chalk, a line of grey stones can be seen. Next to the stones a deeper hole has been dug. At the bottom of this hole is a gleam of white.

‘Haven’t you dug them up?’ asks Nelson.

‘No,’ says Ruth, ‘we need to record and draw the grave and skeleton on plan so that we can understand its context. It’ll be really important to check which way the skeleton is lying. Could be significant if it points to the east, for example.’

‘The brothers used to tell us to sleep with our feet to the east,’ says Nelson suddenly remembering, ‘so that if we died in the night we could walk to heaven.’

‘An interesting survival of superstition,’ says Ruth coolly. Nelson remembers that she has no time for religion. ‘Churches,’ Ruth goes on, ‘are nearly always built east to west, never north to south.’

‘I’ll remember that.’

‘And sometimes,’ cuts in Max, ‘men are buried facing west and women facing east.’

‘Sounds sexist to me,’ says Nelson straightening up.

‘And you’re never sexist,’ says Ruth.

‘Never. I’ve just been on a course all about redefining gender roles in the police force.’

‘What was it like?’

‘Crap. I left at lunchtime.’

Ruth laughs and Max, who has been looking disapproving, smiles too, looking from Ruth to Nelson and back again. Clearly more is going on here than he realised.

‘We’re just off to the Phoenix for a drink,’ Ruth is saying. ‘Do you want to come?’

‘I can’t,’ says Nelson regretfully, ‘I’ve got some sort of do to go to.’

‘A do?’

‘A ball in aid of the festival. It’s being held at the castle. Black tie and all that. Michelle wanted to go.’

‘How the other half lives,’ says Ruth.

Nelson’s only reply is a grunt. He can’t think of anything worse than poncing around in a monkey suit in the company of a load of arty-farty types. But not only his wife but his boss, Gerry Whitcliffe, were insistent that he should go. ‘Just the sort of PR the force needs,’ Whitcliffe had said, carefully not mentioning that it was Nelson’s handling of the Saltmarsh case that had left the local force so in need of good publicity. PR! Jesus wept.

‘Pity,’ says Max lightly, his hand just hovering around Ruth’s shoulders. ‘Another time perhaps.’

Nelson watches them go. The beer garden of the Phoenix is filling up with early evening drinkers. He can hear laughter and the clink of glasses. He can’t help hoping that Leah’s uncle has run out of cider.

CHAPTER 2

Ruth drives slowly along the A47 towards King's Lynn. Although it is past eight, the traffic is never-ending. Where can they all be going, thinks Ruth, tapping impatiently on her steering wheel and looking out at the stream of lorries, cars, caravans and people carriers. It's not the holiday season yet and it's far too late for the school run or even the commuter traffic. What are all these people doing, heading for Narborough, Marham and West Winch? Why are they all trapped on this particular circle of hell? For several junctions now she has been stuck behind a large BMW with two smug riding hats on the back shelf. She starts to hate the BMW family with their Longleat sticker and personalised number-plate (SH3LLY 40) and their horse riding at weekends. She bets they don't even really like horses. Brought up in a London suburb, Ruth has never been on a horse though she does have a secret fondness for books about ponies. She bets that Shelly got the car for her fortieth birthday along with a holiday in the Caribbean and a special session of Botox. Ruth will be forty in two months' time.

She'd enjoyed the drinks in the pub, though she'd only had orange juice. Max had been very interesting, talking about Roman burial traditions. We tend to think of the Romans as so civilised, he'd said, so outraged by the barbaric Iron Age practices but there is plenty of evidence of Roman punishment burials, ritual killing and even infanticide. A boy's skull found in St Albans about ten years ago, for example, showed that its owner had been battered to death and then decapitated. At Springfield in Kent foundation sacrifices of paired babies had been found at all four corners of a Roman temple. Ruth shivers and passes a hand lightly across her stomach.

But Max had been good company for all his tales of death and decapitation. He'd been brought up in Norfolk and obviously loved the place. Ruth told him about her home on the north Norfolk coast, about the winds that come directly from Siberia and the marshes flowering purple with sea lavender. I'd like to visit one day, Max had said. That would be nice, Ruth had replied but neither had said more. Ruth had agreed to visit the dig next

week though. Max has a whole team coming up from Sussex. They are going to camp in the fields and dig all through May and June. Ruth feels a rush of nostalgia for summer digs; for the camaraderie, the songs and dope-smoking round the camp fire, the days of back-breaking labour. She doesn't miss the lack of proper loos or showers though. She's too old for all that.

Thank God, SH3LLY 40 has turned off to the left and Ruth can see signs for Snettisham and Hunstanton. She's nearly home. On Radio 4 someone is talking about bereavement: 'for everything there is a season'. Ruth loves Radio 4 but there are limits. She switches to cassette (her car is too old for a CD player) and the air is filled with Bruce Springsteen's heartfelt all-American whine. Ruth loves Bruce Springsteen – the open road, the doomed love, the friends called Bobby Joe who've fallen on hard times – and no amount of derision is going to make her change her mind. She turns the sound up.

Ruth is now driving between overhanging trees, the verges rich with cow parsley. In a moment, she knows, the trees will vanish as if by magic and the sea will be in front of her. She never tires of this moment, when the horizon suddenly stretches away into infinity, blue turning to white turning to gold. She drives faster and, when she reaches the caravan site that marks the start of her road home, she stops and gets out of the car, letting the sea breeze blow back her hair.

Ahead of her are the sand dunes, blown into fantastic shapes by the wind. The tide is out and the sea is barely visible, a line of blue against the grey sand. Seagulls call high above and the red sail of a windsurfer shimmers silently past.

Without warning, Ruth leans over and is violently sick.

*

Norwich Castle, a Victorian icing covering a rich medieval cake, is now a museum. Nelson has been there several times with his daughters. They used to love the dungeons, he remembers, and Laura had a soft spot for the teapot collection. He hasn't been for years though and as he and his wife Michelle ascend the winding pathway, floodlit and decorated with heraldic banners, he fears the worst. His fears are justified when they are met by serving wenches. The invitation did not mention fancy dress but these

girls are very definitely wenches, wearing low-cut, vaguely medieval dresses and sporting frilly caps on their heads. They are proffering trays of champagne and Nelson takes the fullest glass, a fact not wasted on Michelle.

‘Trust you to take the biggest,’ she says, accepting a glass of orange juice.

‘I’m going to need alcohol to get through this evening,’ says Nelson as they walk up to the heavy wooden doors. ‘You didn’t tell me it was fancy dress.’

‘It isn’t.’ Michelle is wearing a silver mini-dress which is definitely not medieval. In fact, Nelson feels that it could do with a bit more material, a train or a crinoline or whatever women wore in those days. She looks good though, he has to admit.

They enter a circular reception room to be met by more champagne, someone playing the lute, and, most disturbingly, a jester. Nelson takes a step backwards.

‘Go on,’ Michelle pushes him from behind.

‘There’s a man in tights!’

‘So? He won’t kill you.’

Nelson steps warily into the room, keeping his eye on the jester. He has ignored another danger though, which advances from the opposite direction.

‘Ah Harry! And the beautiful Mrs Nelson.’

It is Whitcliffe, resplendent in a dinner jacket with an open-neck shirt, which he presumably thinks is trendy. He’s also wearing a white scarf. Wanker.

‘Hallo, Gerry.’

Whitcliffe is kissing Michelle’s hand. The jester is hovering hopefully, shaking his bells.

‘You didn’t tell me there’d be people dressed up funny,’ says Nelson, his northern accent, always evident in times of stress, coming to the fore.

‘It’s a medieval theme,’ says Whitcliffe smoothly. ‘Edward does these things so well.’

‘Edward?’

‘Edward Spens,’ says Whitcliffe. ‘You remember I told you that Spens and Co are sponsoring this evening.’

‘The builders. Yes.’

‘Building contractors,’ says a voice behind them.

Nelson swings round to see a good-looking man of his own age,

wearing faultless evening dress. No white scarf or open-neck shirt for him, just a conventional white shirt and black tie, setting off tanned skin and thick dark hair. Nelson dislikes him instantly.

‘Edward!’ Whitcliffe obviously doesn’t share this feeling. ‘This is Edward Spens, our host. Edward, this is Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson and his lovely wife, Michelle.’

Edward Spens looks admiringly at Michelle. ‘I never knew policemen had such beautiful wives, Gerry.’

‘It’s a perk of the job,’ says Nelson tightly.

Whitcliffe, who isn’t married (a cause of much speculation), says nothing. Michelle, who is used to male admiration, flashes a wide but slightly distancing smile.

‘Nelson,’ Edward Spens is saying, ‘weren’t you the copper involved in the Saltmarsh affair?’

‘Yes.’ Nelson hates talking about his work and he particularly dislikes being called a ‘copper’.

‘What a terrible business.’ Spens is looking serious.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, thank God you solved it.’ Spens pats him heartily on the back.

Thank Ruth Galloway as well, thinks Nelson. But Ruth has always wanted her involvement in the case kept as low-key as possible.

‘Luckily cases like that don’t occur very often,’ he says.

‘I’ll drink to that!’ Spens pushes another glass of champagne into his hand.

*

Nobody has seen Ruth throw up so she simply kicks some dirt over the vomit and gets back in the car. Bruce Springsteen is telling the improbably named Wendy that they are born to run. Ruth backs the car out of the caravan site and heads for home.

Her cottage is one of three on the edge of the Saltmarsh. One cottage is empty and the other is owned by weekenders who visit less and less now that their children are growing up. The isolation does not bother Ruth. In fact, as she gets out of her car and drinks in the wide expanse of marsh, the distant sand dunes and the far-off murmur of the sea, her enjoyment is enhanced by the thought that this view is hers and hers alone. Smiling she opens her front

door.

Ruth's ginger cat, Flint, has been lying in wait and now advances, complaining loudly. He has food in his bowl but it is obviously out of the question that he should eat it. He purrs around Ruth's legs until she gives him a fresh bowlful, heaving slightly at the smell. Then he sniffs it fastidiously and goes out of the cat flap.

Ruth sits at the table by the window to check her answer-phone messages. One is from her mother asking if Ruth is still coming to stay at the weekend. Her mother always expects Ruth's plans to change at the last minute, despite the fact that Ruth is actually extremely punctual and reliable. The second message is from her friend Shona, burbling on about her married boyfriend Phil. The third is from Max Grey. Interesting.

'Hi Ruth. Just to say how much I enjoyed our chat. I was just thinking about our body. If the head is missing, that could be evidence of a head-cult. Have you heard of the Lankhills excavations in Winchester? Seven decapitated bodies were found in a Roman cemetery, including a child's. Could that be what we've got here, I wonder? Anyway, speak soon.'

Ruth thinks how strangely archaeologists speak sometimes. 'Our body'. The bones found buried under the Roman foundations have become 'our body', linking Ruth and Max in some strange, surreal way. They both feel a sense of ownership, even sympathy, towards them. But is this enough reason for Max to leave this message? Did he really just want a cosy chat about decapitated bodies or did he, just possibly, want to talk to her again?

Ruth sighs. It's all too complicated for her. Besides, she has other things on her mind. Tomorrow she has to drive to London and tell her mother that she's pregnant.

*

'So, you see, we're developing three key sites in the heart of Norwich. The old tannery, the Odeon cinema and the derelict house on Woolmarket Street.'

'Woolmarket Street?' Whitcliffe cuts in. 'Didn't that used to be a children's home?'

'I believe so, yes,' says Edward Spens, spreading butter on his roll. 'Are you a local Norwich boy, Gerry?'

That explains a lot, thinks Nelson, as Whitcliffe nods. Nelson was born in Blackpool and would be back there like a shot if it wasn't for Michelle and the girls. It had been Michelle's idea for him to take the Norfolk job and, deep down, he still resents her for it. The girls don't like Blackpool; everyone talks funnily and you eat your supper at five o'clock. And it's too cold for them, although the local girls seem to wear miniskirts all year round.

They are at the 'banquet' stage now; roast pork disguised as suckling pig. Michelle has left most of hers. She is sparkling away at her neighbour, some goon called Leo wearing a pink shirt and ridiculous glasses. Nelson's neighbour, a regal woman in blue satin, has ignored him completely, which has left him listening to Edward Spens' relentless sales pitch.

'It's a family company,' Spens is saying. 'Built up by my father, Roderick Spens. Actually it's Sir Roderick, he was knighted for services to the building trade. Dad's supposed to be retired but he still comes into the office every day. Tries to tell me how to run things. He's against me developing the Woolmarket site, for example, but it's a prime piece of real estate.' He laughs expansively. Nelson regards him stonily. *Real estate*. Who does this guy think he is?

'Harry!' Nelson is aware that his wife is actually speaking to him, twinkling charmingly from across the table.

'Harry. Leo was talking about the Roman settlement that they've dug up. The one near Swaffham. I was telling him that we've got a friend who's an archaeologist.'

Michelle and Ruth, rather to Nelson's surprise, hit it off immediately. Michelle likes boasting about her intellectual friend. 'Honestly, she doesn't care what she looks like.' Michelle will be delighted to hear that Ruth hasn't lost any weight.

'Yes,' says Nelson guardedly, 'she works at the university.'

'I'm writing a play,' says Leo earnestly, 'about the Roman God Janus. The two-faced God. The God of beginnings and endings, of doorways and openings, of the past and the future.'

Janus. Something is echoing in Nelson's head but is having trouble fighting through the champagne and the suckling pig. Of course, it was Ruth's know-all friend, the one from Sussex University. *Janus, God of doors and openings*.

And suddenly Nelson realises something else. It is as if he is seeing a film rewind and, in the second viewing, recognising

something that was there all the time. He sees Ruth walking towards him, her loose shirt blown flat against her body. She hasn't lost weight. In fact, she may even have put some on.

Could Ruth possibly be pregnant? Because, if so, he could be the father.

CHAPTER 3

‘What do you mean you’re pregnant? You’re not even married.’

This is one of the times when Ruth just wants to lift up her head and howl. She has made her disclosure on a Sunday afternoon walk in Castle Wood, hoping that the open-air setting might dissuade her mother from having hysterics. Fat chance.

‘You don’t need to be married to have a baby,’ she says.

Her mother draws herself up to her full height. Like Ruth she is a big woman but majestic rather than fat. She looks like Queen Victoria in M&S slacks.

‘I am aware of that, Ruth. What I mean, as you know very well, is that God has ordained marriage for the purpose of having children.’

Well, she might have guessed that God would come into it somewhere. Ruth’s parents are both Born Again Christians who believe that unless Ruth too is Born Again, she faces a one-way trip to eternal damnation. A location that, at present, seems preferable to Eltham.

‘Well I’m not married,’ says Ruth steadily. But the father is, she adds silently. She knows this piece of information will not help matters at all.

‘Who’s the father?’ asks her father, rather hoarsely. Ruth looks at him sadly. She usually finds her dad a bit easier than her mother but he seems about to work himself up into Victorian father frenzy.

‘I’d rather not say.’

‘You’d rather not say!’ Ruth’s mother collapses onto a tree stump. ‘Oh, Ruth, how could you?’ She starts to sob, noisily, into a tiny lace handkerchief. Other Sunday walkers look at her curiously as they tramp past. Ruth kneels beside her mother feeling, despite herself, extremely guilty.

‘Mum, look, I’m sorry if this has upset you but please try to look at the positive side. You’ll be getting a grandchild. I’ll be having a baby. Isn’t that something to be happy about?’

‘Happy about having a bastard grandchild,’ rumbles her father. ‘Are you out of your mind?’

Obviously, thinks Ruth. She must have been out of her mind to

assume, for one second, that her parents would be happy at the news. That they would rejoice with her. That they would accept that, while their daughter doesn't have a partner, she does have a baby and that the baby is, if not planned, desperately wanted. How desperately, Ruth does not like to admit even to herself. All she knows is, the moment when her suspicions crystallised into that thin blue line on her pregnancy kit, her heart went into overdrive. It was as if every heartbreak and disappointment in her life, to say nothing of the traumas of the past few months, had faded into nothingness, leaving only a boundless blue contentment.

'I hope you'll change your minds,' is all she says. She stands and helps her mother up from the tree stump.

'We never change our minds about anything,' says her mother proudly. 'That's not the sort of people we are.'

You can say that again, thinks Ruth. Being Born Again has only increased her parents' already well-developed sense of infallibility. After all, if God has chosen you, how can you ever be wrong again? About anything. Her parents found God when she was a teenager. Far too late for Ruth, although she had, for a time, accompanied them to services. She has never found God but, then again, she isn't about to go looking.

Her father gestures dramatically towards Severndroog Castle in the background.

'Our values don't change. They haven't changed since that castle was built in the Middle Ages.'

Ruth does not add that the castle is, in fact, an eighteenth-century folly or that the Middle Ages were presumably rife with illegitimate babies and unmarried mothers. She only says, 'Well I hope you'll feel differently when the baby's born.'

Neither of her parents answers but, when they cross Avery Hill Road, Ruth's father takes her arm in a protective way, as if being pregnant has seriously impaired her traffic sense. This Ruth finds obscurely comforting.

*

Sunday afternoon in a King's Lynn suburb. Cars are being washed, fresh-faced families set out on bike rides, dogs are walked, newspapers are read and the smell of Sunday lunch

permeates the air. After his own lunch (roast lamb with vegetarian option for Laura) Nelson announces his intention of mowing the lawn. Michelle says she'll go to the gym (she's the only woman in the world who wants to go to the gym on a Sunday afternoon) and Laura says she'll go too, for a swim. That leaves Nelson and sixteen-year-old Rebecca, who immediately disappears upstairs to plug herself into her iPod and computer. This suits Nelson fine. He wants to be by himself, performing some mundane domestic task. It's the way he thinks best.

By the time he has got out the lawnmower, found that it has run out of petrol, fetched the spare can from the boot of his Mercedes, dropped the garage door on his foot, fixed the broken clutch cable and moved Michelle's washing line, he's thinking furiously. Is Ruth pregnant? Is it his baby? They spent one night together, back in February, but, at the same time, he knew Ruth was seeing her ex-boyfriend, Peter. It's possible then that the baby is Peter's. And what about Erik, Ruth's old tutor? He always thought Ruth was very close to Erik. Could they have been sleeping together? It's a funny thing but he thinks of Ruth as somehow existing on a higher plane than most people. The night they slept together had seemed removed from the ordinary motivations of lust and desire, though those had played their part. He and Ruth had come together as equals who had just been through a terrible experience together. It had just seemed ... right. The sex, Nelson remembers, had been incredible.

Somehow, remembering that sense of rightness, Nelson feels convinced that Ruth did conceive that night. It seems almost preordained. Jesus – he gives the mower a vicious shove – he's thinking like some crap women's magazine. It's highly unlikely that she got pregnant; she was probably using birth control (which was never mentioned; they didn't talk much). He's not even sure that she is pregnant. She has probably just put on weight.

'Dad!'

Rebecca is leaning out of an upstairs window. With her long blonde hair and serious face she looks oddly accusatory, like a Victorian picture of a wronged woman. For one stupid moment Nelson imagines that his daughter knows all about Ruth, is about to tell Michelle ...

'Dad. It's Doug on the phone. He says do you want to go to the

pub tonight.'

Nelson pauses, breathing hard. The smell of mown grass is almost overpowering.

'Thanks, love. Tell him no, I'd rather spend the night in with my family.'

Rebecca shrugs. 'Suit yourself. But I think Mum's going out to the pictures.'

*

That evening, as Nelson and his daughters sit in front of an old James Bond film (Michelle has indeed gone to the cinema with a girlfriend), Ruth is mindlessly watching the same movie in her parents' sitting room. She loathes James Bond, thinks he's sexist, racist and almost unbearably boring but her parents seem to be enjoying the film (although was there ever anyone less Born Again than James Bond?) and the last thing she wants to do is argue with them. The arguments about her baby have continued, wearily, all afternoon. How could she? Who's going to look after it when she goes to work? Hasn't she heard that families need fathers? What's the poor little mite going to do without a father, without a family, without God? 'You'll be its family,' Ruth said, 'and you can tell it about God.' Although, she adds silently, I shall tell it my own version. That God is a made-up fairy tale, like *Snow White* only nastier.

Now, mercifully, her parents are silent, happily watching James Bond beat up a scantily dressed woman. When Ruth's phone rings, they both look at her accusingly.

Ruth walks out into the hall to answer it. 'Phil' says the message on the screen. Her boss. Head of the Archaeology Department at the University of North Norfolk.

'Hallo, Phil.'

'Hi, Ruth. Not interrupting anything am I?'

'I'm visiting my parents.'

'Oh ... good. Just that something's come up on one of the field sites.'

The university employs field archaeologists to work on sites that are being developed, usually for building. The field archaeologists nominally report to Phil and are the bane of his life.

‘Which one?’

‘Woolmarket Street, I think.’

‘What have they found?’

Though, of course, she already knows the answer.

‘Human remains.’

4th June

Festival for Hercules Custos

Working all day today, translating Catullus. She distracted me, which is Wrong. I heard the voices again last night. I used to think that I was going mad but now I know that I have been Chosen. It's a great responsibility.

It is not only the Lady who talks in my mind but the whole army of saints who once occupied this place. The martyrs who died for the Faith. They speak to me too. This is my body. This is my blood.

Death must be avenged by another death, blood by blood. I understand that now. She will never understand because she is a woman and women are Weak. Everyone knows that. She is too attached to the child. A mistake.

I sacrificed again last night and the result was the same. Wait. But she grows bigger. She is walking and soon she will be talking. I'm not a cruel person. The Gods know I would never willingly hurt anyone. But the family comes first. What must be done, must be done. Fortes fortuna iuvat.

CHAPTER 4

It is afternoon by the time that Ruth reaches the site on Woolmarket Street. She has no lectures on a Monday so took the opportunity to have a lie-in at her parents' house (she is still being sick in the mornings – and evenings too, for that matter). Her mother made her porridge because that is meant to be good for morning sickness. Ruth could only manage a few spoonfuls but was dimly aware that her mother was trying to be kind. No other mention was made of the bastard grandchild.

Woolmarket Street is one of the oldest in Norwich, one of a maze of narrow, medieval alleyways interspersed by new, hideous office blocks. As Ruth drives carefully through the one-way system, city map open beside her, she sees part of the old city wall, a lump of flint and stone, looking as if it has grown there rather than being built. Opposite this landmark is a massive Victorian house, set back from the road behind iron gates. A sign on one of the gates declares that Spens and Co are building seventy-five luxury apartments on this site.

From the gates, the house still looks impressive. A tree-lined drive, sweeping and gracious, leads up to a looming red-brick façade. Through the trees Ruth can see curved windows, archways, turrets and other displays of Victorian Gothic grandeur. But as she gets closer she realises that this is only a shell. Diggers and skips have taken over. The outer walls of the house still stand but inside men in hard hats scurry busily along planks and hastily constructed walkways, trundling wheelbarrows along what were once corridors, drawing rooms, kitchens and pantries.

Ruth parks at the front of the house. On what would once have been the front lawn there is now a prefabricated hut and a portaloo. Mounds of sand and cement cover the grass and the air is full of noise, the clang of metal against metal and the relentless grind of machinery.

Grabbing her site gear, she gets out of the car. A red-faced man comes out of the hut.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Dr Ruth Galloway,’ says Ruth, holding out her hand. ‘I’m from

the university. I'm here to see the archaeologists.'

The man grunts, as if his worst suspicions have been confirmed. 'How are my boys ever going to get any work done with archaeologists cluttering up the place?'

Ruth ignores this. 'I believe the lead archaeologist is Ted Cross?'

The man nods. 'Irish Ted. I'll get someone to fetch him.' He hands her a hard hat saying, 'You'll need to wear this' and disappears back into his hut. Ruth knows Irish Ted slightly from previous digs. He is a heavily built man in his late forties, bald and heavily tattooed. There is, to the outer eye at least, nothing Irish about him.

Ted greets her with a grin, showing two gold teeth. 'Come to see our skeleton have you?'

'Yes. Phil rang me.'

Ted spits, presumably at the mention of the head of department. 'This way,' is all he says.

He leads the way towards the main entrance of the house. Standing on its own, impressive and slightly surreal, is a massive stone archway. As they pass underneath Ruth sees that an inscription has been carved into the stone: *Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit*. Ruth is a comprehensive-school girl: she has never studied Latin. 'Omnia' means all or everything, doesn't it? 'Mutantur' sounds like 'mutated' so maybe it means transformed or changed. What about the rest of it? 'Nihil' has a nasty, final sort of sound, like 'nihilism'.

Behind the archway, wide steps lead up to an impressive portico: columns, pediment, the lot. Ruth walks through the stone porch (the door has been taken down) and finds, on the other side of the wall, utter desolation. The interior of the house has vanished, leaving only rubble and churned-up stone. The occasional staircase and doorframe still stand, looking unreal, like stage scenery. Here and there, Ruth can see patches of wallpaper on half-demolished walls and stray pieces of furniture, washed up like flotsam and jetsam: a filing cabinet, a ceramic bath, a fridge door still sporting its jaunty magnets, 'You don't have to be mad to work here', 'There's no I in Teamwork'.

'Building work's well advanced,' she says.

'Yeah,' Ted smiles sardonically, 'Edward Spens is in a hurry. He doesn't like archaeologists slowing things down.'

‘The arch is very grand.’

‘It’s staying apparently. Going to be a feature in the new building. Spens reckons it gives the place class.’

‘Any idea what the inscription means?’

‘Are you kidding? I went to school in Bolton. Watch your step here.’

Behind the doorway the ground drops away sharply. All that remains of what must have been the entrance hall is a narrow ledge, still paved with black and white tiles, chipped and discoloured. In front and directly underneath the doorstep is a trench. Ruth recognises archaeologists’ handiwork at once. The sides are perfectly straight and a red-and-white measuring pole marks the depth. A young woman in a hard hat is standing in the trench, looking up at them.

‘This is Trace,’ says Ted, ‘one of the field archaeologists.’

Ruth knows Trace by sight. She’s a familiar figure on summer digs and she also works at the museum. She is just the sort of woman who makes Ruth feel inadequate – whippet-thin, wearing a sleeveless jerkin, her muscles standing out like whipcord. The hair protruding from the hat is dark purple.

‘Where are the bones?’ asks Ruth.

Trace points to the far end of the earth wall.

‘Right under the main doorway,’ says Ted, reading her thoughts.

She sees it at once – the grave cut. Below the stone doorstep (still in place) and a thin layer of cement, the earth has been churned up. Normally you would expect to see a layer of brick followed by foundation rubble, but here sand, stones and earth are mixed together like builder’s soup. These layers have been disturbed, not that long ago, and the line cutting through them is called – Ruth realises for the first time how ominous the name is – the grave cut. And, sure enough, below the disarranged earth lie the bones.

Ruth kneels down. They are human, she sees that at once.

‘Have you called the police?’ she asks. ‘The coroner?’

‘No,’ says Trace, rather sullenly. ‘We thought we’d wait for you.’

‘What do you think?’ asks Ted, leaning over her shoulder.

‘They’re human, they look like a child’s. Hard to tell the age.’ Recently unearthed bones are fairly easy to date but after that, as

Ruth knows to her cost, analysis is a difficult business. Though the grave cut is recent, the bones could be anything from fifty to several hundred (maybe even thousand) years old. She is looking at a cross-section, the bones suspended in the side of the trench. They appear to be crouched in a foetal position. She looks at Ted. 'No skull,' she says.

'No,' he says chattily, 'we noticed that.'

All of a sudden, Ruth knows she is going to be sick again. She lurches away from Ted and retches violently in the corner of the trench. Trace looks at her with horror.

Ted, though, seems undisturbed. 'Are you all right?' he asks. 'Would you like some water?'

'Yes please.' Ruth's head is pounding and she knows that she is shaking. Why did this have to happen here? It will be all over the department by tomorrow. She crouches down, trying to control her breathing.

'Here.' Ted has returned with a battered-looking water bottle. Ruth takes a cautious sip and feels her insides settle slightly. She must stay calm. Breathe.

'I'm sorry,' she says, 'must have been something I ate.'

'Motorway food,' says Ted sympathetically.

'Yes,' says Ruth, straightening up. 'We'd better call the police.'

'Shall I dial 999?' asks Trace, sounding animated for the first time.

'I've got a number,' says Ruth, getting out her mobile phone and dialling.

'Ruth!' says a surprised voice, 'why are you calling?'

'We've found some bones, Nelson,' says Ruth. 'I think you'd better come.'

*

By the time Nelson arrives the builders have gone home, leaving only the very irritated foreman. 'Edward Spens wants this site clear by the end of the week,' he keeps saying.

'I'm sure he wouldn't want to get in the way of a police inquiry,' says Ruth tartly. The foreman looks as if he isn't so sure about this.

Ruth hears Nelson's Mercedes screeching around the curved driveway. She is not sure how she feels about Nelson. She likes

him, more than likes him, but she knows that as her pregnancy becomes more obvious things are going to get very difficult between them. Still there is no reason for Nelson to suspect for a few weeks yet. Lucky she has always worn baggy clothes.

Then Nelson himself appears, framed briefly in the doorway. At his shoulder is a policeman called Clough, whom Ruth knows by sight. Nelson speaks briefly to Clough and then strides along the narrow walkway, jumping lightly into the trench. This is Ruth's main memory of him; always hurrying, always eager to get on to the next thing. But she knows that he can be patient when it comes to an enquiry. Almost as patient as an archaeologist.

'Who's in charge?' is his first question.

'Me', Ruth wants to say, but the foreman bustles forward.

'Derek Andrews,' he says, 'foreman.'

Nelson grunts and looks past him, to where Ruth is standing.

'Where are the bones?'

'Here,' says Ruth. During the wait she, Ted and Trace have exposed more of the bones and she has photographed them, using the measuring pole as a scale. The skeleton is now protruding like a macabre mosaic. Nelson squats down and touches a bone gently with the tip of one finger.

'Are you sure they're human?' he asks.

'Pretty sure,' says Ruth. 'There may be animal bones mixed in there but I think I can see tibia and fibula.'

'Are you going to take them out?'

'I want to expose the whole skeleton first,' she says. 'Remember what I said on the Roman site, about context?'

Nelson straightens up. 'How do we know these bones aren't Roman?' he says. 'Or bloody Stone Age, like the other ones.'

'Iron Age,' says Ruth, through gritted teeth. 'We don't know for sure,' she continues coolly, 'but the grave looks fairly recent. See the lines cutting through the strata? I guess the body was buried when the walls were built.'

'When was that?' asks Nelson.

'Well, the house looks Victorian. About a hundred and fifty years ago maybe.'

'You call that recent?'

'What was on this site before?' asks Clough.

'Children's home,' says Nelson briefly. 'Run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.'

Clough gives a sharp intake of breath.

‘What?’ Nelson asks irritably.

‘Well, it was run by nuns, wasn’t it?’ says Clough. ‘And you know what they’re like. This could be some poor kiddie they killed.’

‘No I don’t know what they’re like,’ says Nelson, his face darkening, ‘and you, Sergeant, would do well not to jump to conclusions.’

‘We think there was a medieval churchyard on this site,’ cuts in Ted. ‘That’s why we’re excavating here. County archaeologist insisted we do a dig before the new build goes up.’

‘Edward Spens was furious,’ says Derek Andrews, ‘says you’re costing him thousands of pounds a day.’

‘Well, we’re not being paid thousands,’ says Trace sulkily. ‘Every brickie on site gets paid more than we do.’

Nelson ignores this, turning to Ruth. ‘Could the bones be medieval?’

‘It’s possible,’ says Ruth, ‘but the context looks modern. Of course, they could be medieval bones that have been buried relatively recently. But I think it’s unlikely. The skeleton looks intact, as if it was buried fairly soon after death.’

‘Well,’ says Nelson decisively, brushing soil off his trousers, ‘we need to close the site until you’ve finished your investigations.’ He raises his hand. ‘And I don’t want to hear what bloody Edward Spens thinks. This is a police matter now. You did well to call me, Ruth, and not the local boys.’

Nelson, Ruth knows, is in charge of something called the Serious Crimes Unit and resents any interference from ‘uniforms’. She is ashamed of how pleased she feels at the praise. Nelson turns to her now, ignoring Trace who obviously hates being outranked like this.

‘How long will you need, Ruth?’

‘A few days, at least. We’ll have to see if there are any more. Also, the head is missing.’

‘The head?’

‘Yes, it looks as though the skeleton is missing its skull. It could be buried somewhere else on site.’

‘Is it a child?’ asks Nelson. ‘The skeleton?’

‘I think so. We’ll be able to tell more when we examine the bones. Children’s bones have growing ends on them, called

epiphyses. As they get older, these fuse with the main part of the bone. Of course,' she adds, seeing Nelson looking glassy-eyed, 'examining the skull is the best way of determining age.'

'You mean because of the teeth?'

'Yes and the growth patterns.'

'Will you be able to tell its sex?'

'It's very difficult if the skeleton is pre-pubescent. Though there was a case recently in Sussex where archaeologists were able to sex foetal skeletons using DNA analysis. Of course, if it's older, the skull should give us a clue.'

'Why?'

'The brow-ridge is more pronounced in post-pubescent males.'

Nelson smiles faintly. 'You mean we're all Neanderthals?'

'Neanderthal man died out,' says Ruth, 'but, yes, something like that.'

'OK.' Nelson turns to Clough. 'We'll need to get the scene-of-crime boys down here.'

Over the last few minutes, Derek Andrews has been looking ready to explode. 'What shall I tell Mr Spens?' he says at last.

'Tell him this is a suspected murder enquiry,' says Nelson, climbing out of the trench. Andrews mutters something incomprehensible.

Ruth follows Nelson along the raised path. She is still feeling sick and slightly dizzy. The black and white tiles merge unpleasantly before her eyes. She stops, breathing hard. Nelson looks at her sharply, 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' she says lightly, forcing herself to straighten up. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'You tell me.'

There is a slightly awkward pause. Ruth sees Clough looking at them curiously.

'I'm fine, Nelson,' says Ruth. 'This is my job, remember.'

Nelson looks at her for another long minute, frowning.

'Rather you than me,' he says at last and heads off back to his car without saying goodbye.

CHAPTER 5

Ruth drives slowly back along the Norwich ring road. She has stopped feeling sick and now feels ravenously hungry, a common pattern over the last few weeks. She stops at a garage and buys a baguette and some mineral water. Plain carbohydrate is what she needs. That and water. She drives along stuffing pieces of bread into her mouth. She's going to put on several stone with this baby, she can see it now. This has been one of the very best things about being pregnant though; not worrying about her weight. Ruth has been overweight since school. How many years of her life has she spent dieting, worrying about her body-mass index and trying to stand on the scales in a way that makes her four pounds lighter? She has been to WeightWatchers and Slimming World and has had several bloated weeks on the cabbage soup diet. In the last few years she has stopped dieting, which has had no effect on her weight but has made her feel, if not happier, at least resigned. She is never going to be one of those women who boasts that they can eat what they like and not get fat ('it's just my metabolism; I'd give anything to have curves'). She's never going to look good in a bikini or vest top. But, by and large, she doesn't care. She wears anonymous, baggy clothes and only looks in the mirror to check that she hasn't got spinach in her teeth. But now, hallelujah, she has an excuse for being fat. She can drink a non-diet Coke without having a chorus of invisible voices berating her: 'Did you see the size of her? Shouldn't she be drinking the diet version?'

Has Nelson noticed anything? She doesn't think so. He was fairly abrupt but that is what Nelson is like when he is on an investigation. And he had deferred to her, asked her how long the excavations would take, much to the annoyance of Trace and the foreman. She wishes she hadn't been sick though. Irish Ted had been nice but she doesn't trust Trace not to tell all her field archaeology friends. Had it been the car journey and the exertion of clambering over the site? Or had it been the skeleton, the foetal position, the thought of the head separated from the body? She remembers Max's talk of head rituals in Celtic mythology. Celts were head hunters. Celtic warriors would cut off their

opponents' heads in battle and hang them from their horses' necks. After battle, the heads would be displayed at the entrance to the temple. The severed head is a recurring theme in Celtic art.

Is the building-site body Celtic or Roman? Is it medieval, a relic from the long vanished churchyard? Maybe, but Ruth is still convinced that it was buried fairly recently, in the last couple of hundred years. The disturbance of the earth under the door suggests that it was buried when the door was put in place. How old was the children's home? She will have to ask Nelson to look at the title deeds and planning history.

She is passing the Swaffham road and, on impulse, makes a sharp turn, earning her a furious hoot from the car behind. She will stop off at the Roman dig, have a word with Max. If nothing else it will be good to be out in the open air after a day spent in the car. The earlier rain has stopped; the air will be sharp and pure at the top of the hill.

To her surprise she finds a coach parked awkwardly at the foot of the grass bank. The driver is still inside, eating a sandwich and reading the *Sun*. As Ruth parks her Renault beside the bus, she notices a group of elderly people approaching. They are dressed in tweeds and waterproofs and some are carrying guidebooks. The slope is steep and some of them are leaning on sticks and breathing heavily, while others sprint along like teenagers. Ruth spots Max bringing up the rear, offering his arm to a large grey-haired woman. Some of the elderly people smile and wave at Ruth and she waves back, although she has no idea who they are. They seem friendly anyway. When everyone is inside the bus, the driver puts down his paper and the wheels churn slowly in the mud. Max waves heartily until they are out of sight.

'Hi!'

Max jumps. 'Ruth. I didn't see you there.'

'Who were the visitors?'

He grimaces. 'The Conservative Association.' Ruth starts to regret waving. 'We've had quite a few groups now. It was the Scouts earlier.'

'Jesus. Two paramilitary organisations in one day.'

Max grins. It's the oldies who scare me most. Did you see that woman walking with me? Looked just like the Emperor Vespasian.'

Ruth laughs. 'I just came to have a look round but if you've had

enough for today ...’

‘No, no.’ Ruth is flattered by Max’s eager denial. ‘I’d love to show you round. We found something interesting today actually.’

They climb the hill, Ruth trying to disguise how out of breath she is. Jesus, at this rate she’ll be immobile at nine months. The trouble was, she wasn’t terribly fit before.

At the top of the hill, Max bounds off towards the furthest trench. Ruth follows more slowly. She can see that, even before his students arrive, Max has been busy. There are now three trenches radiating outwards like spokes on a wheel. The furthest trench is the deepest, and as she gets closer she can see the layers, topsoil then the telltale layer of chalk which indicates that once, thousands of years ago, this whole area was under water. Cut into the chalk line she sees a wall, the mix of flint and mortar with a thin line of bricks distinctly Roman. And, below the bricks, a silver-grey orb, faintly translucent in the evening light.

‘A skull?’

‘Yes. Can’t see any more just yet.’

‘Do you think it could be a foundation sacrifice?’

‘Yes I do.’ Max gestures towards the bricks. ‘I think this may have been the corner of a room, which could be significant. Remember the bodies at Springfield? They were buried in all four corners of the temple.’

‘Is this a temple then?’ Ruth looks round at the trench, with its neat earth walls open to the sky; her archaeologist’s eye seeing instead a stone temple with statues, altar and incense burning.

‘Again, it’s possible. We’ve found some pottery. They could be amphorae. But it could also be a private house.’

Ruth knows that all Roman houses would have had shrines to the domestic gods. The head of the house – the paterfamilias – would have been, to all intents and purposes, the high priest of his own household religion. And at the hearth, the symbolic centre of the home, there would have been a fire sacred to the goddess of fire. What was she called?

‘Vesta,’ supplies Max. ‘Just think of the matches. Her Greek name was Hestia. The women of the house would be responsible for making sure the fire didn’t go out and for making offerings to her.’

‘Haven’t there been instances of bodies being found buried inside Roman houses?’ asks Ruth.

‘In early Roman times it was quite usual for a dead family member to be buried inside the house,’ says Max. ‘We often find the letters DM by these tombs. *Dii Manes* – the spirits of the dead or The Good.’

Ruth shivers, thinking of the little body buried under the door in Woolmarket Street. *The Good*. Children are good, by anybody’s reckoning, and innocent. But this does not seem to stop people from doing dreadful things to them.

‘Children’s bodies have been found too, haven’t they?’ she says.

‘Yes. In Cambridge in the seventies twelve newborn babies were found buried under a Roman building. We don’t know if they had died naturally, maybe even stillborn, or if they were sacrifices.’

‘The field team have found a body on a building site in Norwich,’ says Ruth slowly. ‘I think it’s headless.’

Max looks at her with interest. ‘Modern?’

‘I don’t know. We haven’t done carbon dating yet. But the grave cut looks fairly recent.’

‘The bones could still be old though.’

‘Yes,’ agrees Ruth. ‘But the skeleton looks intact. I think it was buried when the doorway was built.’

‘When was that?’

‘Well, the house is Victorian but the entrance and portico could be later, I suppose. It used to be a children’s home.’

Thinking of the children’s home reminds her of something else. She gets her notebook out of her pocket. ‘Do you know what this means?’ she asks. ‘It was an inscription found at the site.’

Max looks down at the words and, for a second, his face seems to darken. Ruth wonders if she has offended him. ‘I couldn’t understand it myself,’ she says, rather nervously. ‘I didn’t go to the right kind of school.’

‘*Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit*,’ says Max slowly, ‘It means: everything changes, nothing perishes.’

‘Oh ... thanks. Did you learn Latin at school then?’ He has a rather public-school look to him, Ruth thinks. Maybe it’s the curly hair. Or the Range Rover.

Max smiles, his laid-back charming self again. ‘No, but I’ve learnt a good deal of Latin over the years. The Romans are my speciality after all.’

‘Everything changes, nothing perishes,’ repeats Ruth. ‘What sort

of a motto is that?’

‘The perfect motto for an archaeologist,’ says Max, clambering out of the trench.

*

Nelson drives back to the police station, trying to ignore Clough who is noisily eating a packet of crisps. When out on a case Clough eats almost constantly: crisps, sweets, innumerable takeaways. It’s a wonder he’s not the size of a house, thinks Nelson sourly. In fact, Clough has less of a gut than he has. There’s no justice.

‘Do you think it’s a murder?’ asks Clough, crunching away. The smell of cheese and onion is making Nelson feel sick. Perhaps I’ve got morning sickness, he thinks. He suffered psychosomatic pains with both Michelle’s pregnancies. But Ruth may not be pregnant and, even if she is, the child might not be his.

‘I’ve got no idea,’ he says shortly. ‘And you had no business speculating.’

‘Come on, boss, you know what those nuns and priests are like. I read a book once, set in Ireland, and the things they did to those poor kids.’

Nelson is silent, thinking of his own schooling in Catholic establishments. The brothers had been strict, he remembers, strict but fair. And he’d been no angel at school, probably deserved everything he got. He remembers the parish priest, Father Damian, a slight, insignificant man, worshipped by Nelson’s mother who was forever ascribing dogmatic opinions to him. ‘Father Damian thinks, Father Damian says ...’ He couldn’t remember Father Damian himself ever offering an opinion about anything, except about the horses. He’d been a betting man he remembers.

‘Lots of those books are bollocks,’ he says, taking a corner too fast. ‘Authors make everything up just to make money.’

‘Nuns are creepy, though,’ says Clough, unabashed. ‘Those black robes, those headdresses. Spooky.’

‘My aunt’s a nun,’ says Nelson, to shut him up. In fact, Sister Margaret Mary of the Precious Blood is his great-aunt, his grandmother’s sister. He hasn’t seen her for years.

‘You’re joking! You a Catholic then?’

‘Yes,’ says Nelson, though he hasn’t been to church since Rebecca’s first holy communion, eight years ago.

‘Bloody hell, boss. I wouldn’t have had you down as religious.’

‘I’m not,’ says Nelson. ‘You don’t have to be religious to be a Catholic.’

CHAPTER 6

Ruth and Max are in the bar of the Phoenix. Ruth is ragingly hungry once again. She has torn open a packet of crisps (plain) and is having to force herself even to put up a pretence of sharing them with Max.

‘No thanks.’ Max waves the crisps away and takes a gulp of beer. In celebration, Ruth puts four into her mouth.

‘I’d like you to have another look at the bones when we’ve excavated them,’ says Max. ‘Is that possible?’

‘Of course,’ says Ruth, blushing and crunching.

‘After all, that’s your area of expertise isn’t it?’

Ruth agrees that it is, trying to sound like an expert and less like a contestant in a crisp-eating challenge.

‘I’d like to know how and why the body was decapitated,’ says Max. ‘Whether it was before or after death.’

‘Do you think it could be evidence of a head cult?’ asks Ruth.

‘It’s possible. Head cults are more Celtic than Roman but there have been Roman examples. Of course, heads were often preserved as holy relics in medieval times. Think of St Hugh of Lincoln. They cut off his head so it could perform miracles on its own. St Fremund too. There’s a legend that he was seen washing his severed head in a well. Of course, afterwards the well had miraculous powers.’

Max’s voice is interested, even amused, but Ruth has little time for miracles. Her parents, of course, despise anything to do with relics and shrines, seeing them as sinister papist practices. Ruth thinks of the children’s home and of Nelson’s defensiveness about the nuns. He was brought up a Catholic, she knows. She thinks of Cathbad, her friend and sometime Druid. He’d love all this.

‘They think there was a medieval church on my Norwich site,’ she says. ‘That’s why the field team was there in the first place.’

‘You know what Norwich is like,’ says Max, still sounding amused. ‘There are churches everywhere.’

‘A church for every week of the year ...’

‘And a pub for every day,’ concludes Max. They both laugh. For some reason Ruth feels relieved, as if they have somehow moved away from dangerous ground. Max’s eyes meet hers and she feels

herself blushing. Then the moment is ruined as her stomach gives a thunderous rumble.

‘Would you like something to eat?’ says Max. ‘The food here’s pretty good.’

Ruth assents eagerly.

*

It is pitch black by the time she gets back to the Saltmarsh. She drives slowly; the road has ditches on either side and one false turn of the wheel could send her plunging into the darkness. Nothingness. The flat marsh land has disappeared into the night, her headlights the only light for miles. Has the rest of the world ceased to exist? It feels like that sometimes. She drives on in her circle of light, Radio 4 muttering soothingly in her ear.

Her cottage is dark but, as she starts down the path, her untidy garden is suddenly flooded with harsh, white light. Nelson insisted on fitting this security light after the Lucy Downey case. Ruth hates it. She is always being woken up because a fox has wandered across her garden and is caught in the spotlight. She doesn’t mind the dark but the light can be terrifying.

Thank goodness Flint comes hurrying to meet her, purring loudly. Since the death of her other cat, Sparky, Ruth becomes morbidly worried if she doesn’t see Flint as soon as she comes home. What will he do when he has to share my attention with a baby, thinks Ruth, spooning out cat food. But the idea of a baby in the cottage is still unimaginable. Intellectually, she knows she is pregnant and that in six months or so she will have a baby. But she keeps catching herself wondering where she will go on holiday next year and if she might be able to take a sabbatical and go digging in the Virgin Islands. I’ll have a baby by then, she tells herself, but her imagination just can’t cope. Bring pregnant is enough to be going on with; the reality of a baby is, at present, too much for her.

She’d hoped that telling her parents might make it more real but instead their melodramatic response has made the whole thing seem fantastical. Did her father really say, ‘I’ll kill the scoundrel?’ Surely not. Did her mother really weep and say that her worst fears had been realised? Did she really declare that Ruth had been living an immoral life and this was her reward?

Language like this belongs in films and not in real life. Being churchgoers her parents are used to talking about death, destruction and the wages of sin. Ruth is used to scientific facts, soberly presented. presently. She is simply not equipped to cope with the vocabulary.

She will have to tell Phil soon. She can't have people guessing at work and she is sure that Trace will tell everyone that she was sick on the site. Phil will be fine, she's sure. He's a new man, always boasting about changing nappies and helping with housework. Of course, now he's having an affair with Ruth's friend Shona, which doesn't do his perfect husband and father image much good. But Ruth is not supposed to know about that. She will tell Phil and sort out her maternity leave. Perhaps then she will start to believe that she is really going to have a baby.

Somehow she is hungry again and she forages in the kitchen for some biscuits. Then she sits at her desk to check her emails, scrolling down through the requests from students for extra time on their assignments, the supposedly amusing jokes sent from a colleague in the chemistry department, the new timetables for next year. Incredible to think that the academic year is almost at an end.

She is just about to delete another email from the chemistry department when she sees the name of the sender.

From: Michael Malone

Date: 19 May 2008 17.30

To: Ruth Galloway

Subject: Imbolc

Michael Malone, also known as Cathbad, sometime Druid, also employed as a lab assistant in the chemistry department. Strange that she had been thinking about Cathbad only that evening, sitting in the pub with Max. But, on second thoughts, maybe not that strange. Cathbad has a habit of appearing just when he is needed. Cathbad would say that this is his sixth sense, his extraordinary sensitivity to the world around him. Ruth prefers to think of it as coincidence. As far as she is concerned, the jury is out on Cathbad's sixth sense.

Light a fire to celebrate Imbolc [reads the email], the Gaelic festival of the coming of spring. Join us on Saltmarsh beach on Friday 23rd May at six o'clock. Light a fire for Brigid, the

goddess of holy wells, sacred flames and healing.

Below, in rather less high-flown language, Cathbad has written:

Imbolc is traditionally celebrated on 2nd Feb but the weather's been so bad I thought we'd wait. I don't expect Brigid will mind! Do come, Ruth.

He finishes with a Gaelic verse to which he has kindly added a translation.

Thig an nathair as an toll

La donn Bride,

Ged robh trì traighean dh' an t-sneachd

Air leachd an lair.

The serpent will come from the hole

On the brown Day of Bride,

*Though there should be three feet of snow On
the flat surface of the ground.*

Ruth looks at this email for a long time. On one hand it is Cathbad doing what he does best, combining Celtic mysticism with an opportunity for binge drinking and dancing round a fire. On the other hand ... She points her cursor at the words 'goddess of holy wells'. It seems strange, even sinister, that this email should come just after her discussion with Max. Ruth wonders about the term 'holy wells'. Brigid seems distinctly pagan – in what sense were her wells holy? And what's this about 'sacred flames'? Is Brigid another fire goddess? Sacred, holy – it is the language of the Church but she knows that there will be nothing Christian about the celebration on Saltmarsh beach.

On impulse, she types 'St Bridget' into her search engine. Immediately, she comes up with a Wikipedia entry for St Bridget, or Brigid. St Bridget, she reads, is considered one of Ireland's patron saints, along with Patrick and Columba. Her feast day is the first of February.

Imbolc, according to Cathbad, is usually held on the second of February. Does the holy Bridget (a nun, she discovers) have anything to do with the earlier, pagan feast day? She reads on. Bridget founded Kildare monastery, which is sometimes called 'the church of the oak' after the large oak tree which grew outside Bridget's cell. The oak, Ruth knows, is highly important in Norse and Celtic mythology. The word Druid even comes from

the Celtic word for oak 'derw'.

Another story concerns 'St Bridget's cross'. Apparently, Bridget made a cross out of reeds and placed it beside a dying man in order to convert him (might have been more useful to have called a doctor, Ruth thinks). Anyway, traditionally, a new cross is made every St Bridget's day and the old one burnt to keep the maker's house safe from fire. Clearly there is a thin line between the pagan Brigid's fire and the saintly Bridget's burning cross.

Max would be interested in this, thinks Ruth. Should she invite him to Cathbad's Imbolc celebration? Max did say that he wanted to see the Saltmarsh. And it is interesting, too, from an archaeological perspective. Ten years ago, Ruth's extutor, Erik, discovered a Bronze-Age wooden henge on Saltmarsh beach. That was where Ruth first met Cathbad. He was one of the Druids fighting to stop the henge's timbers being removed to a museum. The Druids had lost, even though Erik had sympathised with them, and now all that is left of the henge is a slightly blackened circle of sand.

Ruth has Max's email address. She'll send a casual invitation to the Imbolc thing. Cathbad won't mind, she's sure. Druids aren't exactly hung up on numbers and table settings. And he would like the chance of converting another academic to the 'old ways'. Thinking of Max's face as he described St Hugh and St Fremund, Ruth thinks that he may well be a closet Christian. Well, that won't deter Cathbad. He is open to any form of ritual, though he does tend to alienate the more devout by referring to Jesus as 'the great shaman'.

Ruth starts to type when suddenly a light comes on, making her momentarily shield her eyes. After a second she realises that it is the security light. She goes to the window and looks out. The garden is flooded with the glare, each blade of grass sharply defined, white against black. But there is no living creature to be seen.

8th June

Day consecrated for Vesta

The proper thing to do is to sacrifice nine black puppies to Hecate. I worried about this because, owing to my asthma, I don't have even one puppy. And I do like to do the right thing. In the end, I killed a cat. I didn't like doing it because I'm fond of animals. But it was old. A scrawny black cat who used to sleep in the sun outside my window. I think it belongs to some old lady in the alms cottages. Anyway, yesterday when the domus was deserted I crept out and cut its throat. It screamed and scratched and I realised that I should have hit it on the head first. Oh well, tamdiu discendum est, quamdiu vivas. We live and learn. I chased it into the bushes, caught it by its tail and finished the job. Then I hacked off the head. It was hard work but I found an axe in the outhouse which did the job admirably. The axe will be useful later so I hid it in the usual place. There was a hell of a lot of blood. Too much really. I got a bucket of water and cleaned the pathway and I buried the cat beneath the laurel bush. I was exhausted after all that and had to lie down. I just hope Hecate is satisfied.

CHAPTER 7

Nelson is in his car, one of his favourite places, doing one of his favourite things, driving to interrogate a suspect. Of course, Whitcliffe would say that he is ‘merely popping down to have a chat’ with Father Patrick Hennessey, ex-principal of the Sacred Heart Children’s Home. There is, as yet, no crime. Ruth’s skeleton has, as yet, no age and no sex. But Nelson has been a policeman long enough to smell wrongdoing. As soon as he looked into that trench (‘grave’ is how he thinks of it), as soon as he saw the bones, so small and oddly vulnerable curled up in the foetal position, he knew. He knew that he was looking at a murder victim. And, if the bones do turn out to be medieval, or even bloody Iron Age again, he knows that he will still be right. That body, that child, was murdered.

When Nelson is asked what’s the worst thing about being a policeman, he sometimes answers ‘the smell’. It is partly meant as a rather grim joke but, in fact, it conceals an even grimmer truth. Villains, the feral, rat-like kind, do smell. As a young policeman, Nelson once had to accompany a convicted paedophile from court to prison. Being locked in the back of a van with this scum for a sixty-mile journey was one of the worst experiences of his life. Nelson remembers the man had actually tried to talk to him. Had even, incredible as it seems, wanted to be friendly. ‘Don’t. fucking. talk. to. me.’ Nelson had spat, before they had even reached the outskirts of Manchester. But it is the smell that he remembers most. This man would obviously have had a shower in prison but he absolutely *stank*: a fetid, rotten smell that reeked of unwashed clothes, windowless rooms, of fear and unspeakable obsession. When he got home that night, Nelson had washed and showered three times but sometimes, even today, he can still smell it. The stench of evil.

Places smell too. The downstairs loo where he once found the body of a little girl, murdered by her mother; the garbagestrewn backstreet where he saw a colleague stabbed to death; the desolate beach where he and Ruth unearthed the body of another dead girl. There may not have been an actual smell but there was something in the air, heaviness, a sense of secrecy and of things

left to fester and rot.

And Nelson had smelt it on that building site. No matter how many years had passed since that little body was buried beneath the floorboards, the smell was still there. It's a murder scene; Nelson is sure of it.

The children's home had closed in 1981; afterwards the building had been used as some sort of council offices. Now Edward Spens is planning to build seventy-five luxury apartments on the site.

'Seventy-five!' Nelson had echoed, when Edward Spens had told him. 'Seventy-five luxury rabbit hutches more like.'

Edward Spens had, of course, been on the phone as soon as Nelson and Clough had got back to the station. He'd been very cordial and full of phrases like 'my duty as a citizen' but had, nevertheless, managed to drop in a few mentions of his very good friend Gerry Whitcliffe and the city's need for new housing, job creation, urban redevelopment la di da di da.

'I appreciate your frustration, sir,' Nelson had said, 'but you must understand that we have a suspected murder enquiry.'

'Murder?' Spens had sounded shocked as Nelson had meant him to be. 'But those bones could be hundreds of years old. That archaeologist chap Ted was telling me that there used to be a medieval churchyard on the site.'

'That's as maybe, sir. I've got Dr Ruth Galloway from the university examining the bones now. I'm hoping that in a few days she'll be able to give me an approximate date.'

'This Ruth Galloway, is she the best person? I know Phil Trent up at the university. He might be able to get us someone more ... senior.'

'Dr Galloway is head of forensic archaeology,' Nelson replied stiffly, 'and an acknowledged expert on bones.' Ruth always claims that this makes her sound like a sniffer dog but, for the present, Spens seemed satisfied.

Spens is losing money, Nelson reflects, not without satisfaction, as he turns off the M25 towards Gatwick. Everyone is talking about the property market caving in. Nelson loathes TV programmes about smug yuppies buying and selling houses but even he has gathered that much. All those smug yuppies will soon be saddled with negative equity and serve them right. His own house is mortgaged up to the hilt, of course, but that doesn't

bother him. Nelson was brought up in a council house. For him, a mortgage is a sign of respectability.

But, even so, Spens had better start building quickly or there will be no one left to buy his luxury apartments. Luxury! Nelson snorts as he overtakes a coach loaded with German tourists. Where there was once one, admittedly large, house, now there will be seventy-five soulless shoe-boxes. It's not his definition of luxury. Actually, he's not sure he possesses one.

Father Patrick Hennessey lives in a church-run 'retreat' in West Sussex. He explains on the phone that this is a sort of retirement placing for priests. 'People come here for a week or even just for a few days, to recharge their spiritual batteries. I wander around asking them if they want to talk to a priest and, when they say no, I wander off again.' Nice work if you can get it, thinks Nelson. It is a beautiful May morning, the fields lush and green, the trees heavy with blossom. As he drives past yet another rose-strewn cottage, Nelson reflects how much he prefers this countryside to Norfolk. Everything is contained: a single oak stands in a gated field, flint cottages surround a pond, gentle hills form perfect framing devices for picturesque villages. There is no threatening expanse of sky, none of the windswept desolation that he so dislikes about his adopted county. Even so, you'd need a ton of money to live here. The villages are heavy on antique shops and low on fast-food outlets. He has to weave his way through a slalom of BMWs, Porsches and shiny Land Rovers. Definitely a cushy retirement billet.

'Can't stand the place,' says Father Patrick Hennessey cheerfully, stomping out over the smooth green lawn to shake Nelson heartily by the hand.

The strength of the handshake does not surprise Nelson. He has met priests like this before; burly, red-faced Irishmen who look more like ex-boxers than clerics. Hennessey is elderly, seventies Nelson reckons, and walks with a stick, but he has a definite physical presence, with shoulders as broad as Nelson's own, a white crew cut and a nose that has clearly been broken several times.

'Why not?' asks Nelson as they walk towards a shady seat overlooking the rose garden. 'Seems a beautiful spot to me.'

'Beautiful,' says Hennessey gloomily, 'yes, I suppose so. But it bores the hell out of me. People talk about seeing God's hand in

nature but, in my opinion, when you've seen one tree you've seen them all. Now, when I see a beautiful building and I think of how God has given man the wits to build it, that's worth celebrating. Have you seen the Gherkin in London? Pure poetry.'

'I'm a city boy myself,' says Nelson cautiously, 'but buildings don't make me think about God exactly.'

Hennessey gives him a rather sharp look. His eyes are very light blue in a weather-beaten face. Intelligent eyes, watchful eyes. And, like his handshake, not particularly gentle.

He lowers himself onto the bench and stretches one leg stiffly in front of him. 'So, Detective Chief Inspector Nelson, you said you wanted to talk to me about SHCH.'

Sacred Heart Children's Home, Nelson works out silently. He hates acronyms. Whitcliffe, of course, loves them.

'Yes,' he says brusquely, 'as you may know, the site is being developed. The plan is to build a number of luxury apartments.'

'Dear God.'

'And in the course of the building work a discovery has been made. A body. Skeleton to be precise, buried under the main doorway. It looks to be that of a child.'

Nelson pauses. Silence, as any policemen knows, is the best way to get information.

But Hennessey, it seems, knows the same trick. He fixes Nelson with his cool, light-blue stare. For a few seconds, neither speaks. An elderly couple walk slowly past them and disappear through a rose-smothered archway.

'We're examining the bones now,' says Nelson, admitting defeat. 'It's possible they predate the home, of course.'

'It's an ancient site, I understand,' says Hennessey. 'I had always heard that there was a church there once. I believe it had the reputation of curing lepers.'

A church. That archaeologist bloke had said a churchyard but, of course, it stands to reason that there would be a church there too. Also that, to Hennessey, the church would be the important factor.

'Our forensic archaeology team,' says Nelson, thinking that this is a rather grand way of describing Ruth, Trace and Irish Ted, 'believe that the grave was dug fairly recently. Maybe when the doorway was put in place.'

'The house was old in my time,' says Father Hennessey mildly,

‘but I assume that you suspect the body was placed there within living memory.’

‘I assume nothing,’ says Nelson. ‘Just wondered if, during your years as principal, you ever had a child go missing. Or anything,’ he adds after a pause.

Hennessey gets up. ‘Let’s walk,’ he says. ‘I get stiff if I sit too long.’

They walk through the archway and between the raised flower beds. Hennessey lets his hand drift amongst the velvety blossoms. ‘Stupid things,’ he says. ‘Could never see the point of flowers.’

Nelson does the silent trick again and this time is successful. After a few hundred yards, Hennessey says, ‘Let’s get this straight, Detective Chief Inspector, there was never any abuse at SHCH when I was there. You can ask anyone. I’m still in touch with many of our former residents. They’ve all got good memories of their time with us. I know the fashion is to look for abuse wherever you see a Catholic priest but, in this instance, you will look in vain.’ He stops, frowning at a particularly vivid pink rose which is swarming up a low stone wall. ‘Nevertheless ...’

Now we’re getting to it, thinks Nelson, careful to keep his face expressionless.

‘Nevertheless ...’ Hennessey sighs. ‘Two children did go missing when I was principal. A boy and a girl. There was a huge search but we never found them. I’ve often wondered ...’ His voice drifts off.

‘What were their names?’ Nelson gets out his notebook.

‘Black. Martin and Elizabeth Black.’

‘Ages?’

‘Martin was twelve and Elizabeth was five.’

Five. Nelson thinks of the little skeleton crouched under the wall.

‘When did they go missing?’

‘The early seventies. 1973, I think.’

‘Have you any idea why they ran away?’

Hennessey starts to walk again. They leave the rose garden and walk down the hill towards an ornamental lake. People sit on benches by the water but no one is speaking. Perhaps they are all praying, thinks Nelson. He is beginning to find the place rather spooky.

‘Martin was a bright boy,’ says Hennessey, ‘a very bright boy.’

Their mother had died and Martin became obsessed with finding their father, who'd gone back to Ireland. I think we all assumed that's where the children had gone but, when we tracked the father down, he had no idea where they were. He hardly knew what day it was. He was an alcoholic, in a terrible state, but the police didn't suspect him of any wrongdoing.'

'And they dropped the case?'

'Eventually. I paid a private investigator to go on searching but he came up with nothing. And we prayed, of course.' He smiles, rather sadly.

'Did you ever suspect that they'd been ... abducted?'

Hennessey looks at him angrily. They are almost exactly the same height. 'I suspected that maybe a stranger ... But if you're implying that someone in SHCH ... Never! We all adored the children. Little Elizabeth was ... she was an angel.'

And Martin wasn't, suspects Nelson. Aloud he says, 'We'll investigate further. Thank you, Father, you've been very helpful.'

As they walk back up to the car park, Hennessey says, 'You said it looks like a child's skeleton – do you know how old the child was?'

'No,' says Nelson, 'the bones are still in the ground so we haven't been able to examine them properly. Also, the head is missing.'

'Missing?'

'Yes. We don't know why that it is.'

'The world is a strange and cruel place, Detective Chief Inspector.'

'It certainly is.'

They have reached Nelson's car and the priest holds out his hand. As they exchange vice-like grips, Hennessey says, 'I believe you're a Catholic, Detective Chief Inspector.'

Nelson drops his hand. 'How did you know?'

Hennessey smiles sweetly. 'You called me Father. Just Father. A non-Catholic would have said Father Hennessey, or even Father Patrick if they wanted to be all happy-clappy about it.'

'I haven't been to church for years,' says Nelson.

'Don't give up on God entirely,' says the priest, still smiling. 'There's always the twitch upon the thread. God bless you, my son.'

When he gets back to the station, Nelson laboriously Googles ‘the twitch upon the thread’ and comes up with a quotation from G.K. Chesterton: ‘I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.’

‘Bollocks,’ says Nelson, switching off the computer.

CHAPTER 8

On the Woolmarket Street site, amongst the bulldozers, Ruth is digging. She works almost in a trance. The sun is warm on her back and, in the distance, she can hear Ted and Trace talking about last night's football. But as far as Ruth is concerned they could be on another planet. Her whole being is concentrated on the skeleton under the doorway. She has levelled off the area above the bones so that the backbone is visible. The body is crouched down, knees curled up, arms around legs. It is now clear that the head is definitely missing although Ruth will have to examine the bones before she can tell if decapitation was the cause of death.

Now, gingerly, she climbs above the trench and photographs the skeleton from another angle. A measuring pole lies beside the bones. The body, bent round as it is, is less than a metre long. A child's body, thinks Ruth, though she has to be careful. Could be an adult of restricted growth – again the bones will contain the answer.

There will have to be a post-mortem; that's standard for any human remains. Ruth will examine the bones at the same time. She is used to the process but she doesn't like it. She doesn't like the sterile atmosphere, the casual jokes of the pathologists, the smell of formaldehyde and Dettol. She remembers what Erik used to say: 'The earth is kindly. She shelters us, she protects us, to her we must return.' Ruth is taking these bones out of the kindly earth and she feels guilty. Erik was once the person Ruth looked up to most in the world but the Saltmarsh case forced her to see him, and many other things, in a different light. Now Erik is dead, his ashes burnt on a dark Norwegian lake, and Ruth has a job to do. She brushes the earth away from the exposed ribcage. In an adult the pelvis and ribs will give clues about the body's sex. In a pre-pubescent this is almost impossible to judge. Exposed now in the chalky earth, this skeleton looks heart-breakingly small.

'How are you doing?' It is Irish Ted, peering over the lip of the trench like Mr Punch.

'Not bad. Skeleton's almost exposed. Just got a few more

drawings to do.'

'We've found something. Want to see?'

Ruth straightens up. Sometimes she feels faint if she gets up too quickly but today she seems miraculously well. Maybe it's the famous second trimester, where, according to the books, you look 'blooming' and have tremendous energy and a renewed sex drive. Sounds fun, thinks Ruth as she follows Ted through the maze of walls and trenches. Something to look forward to at any rate.

At the back of the house some outhouses still remain, their doors hanging crazily, windows smashed. There is also the remains of a conservatory, a skeletal wood frame that still retains a few unbroken panes. As Ruth passes, a workman is systematically smashing the glass. One window obviously contained stained glass, red and blue and yellow. The shards scatter at Ruth's feet like a rainbow.

She follows Ted past the outhouses and into the grounds. Here the new buildings are going up quickly; neat squares of brick and plasterboard. She steps over a cucumber frame, the glass smashed to powder, and passes a tree with a frayed rope hanging from one of its branches. A swing? Broken flagstones form a rudimentary path through the mud. The noise of the cement mixers is deafening.

As directed by Ruth, Ted has dug new trenches along the boundaries of the site, next to the high flint wall. In one of these, Trace is standing, wearing a pink T-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Killer Barbie'.

Ruth looks into the trench. A tiny skeleton lies exposed about a metre below the topsoil. Only this time it is definitely not human.

'What is it?' shouts Ruth, above the noise of the machinery.

'A cat, I think,' says Ted.

'Pet cemetery?'

'Maybe, though I haven't seen any others.'

They haven't found any human bodies either which, given that this was supposed to be a churchyard, is surprising.

Disappointing, the county archaeologist would say. Maybe the site was cleared by the Victorians. It wouldn't be the first archaeological site they had ruined. Ruth looks at the bones protruding from the mud. From the shape of the tail, she is pretty sure that it is feline.

'Family pet?' she suggests, thinking of Flint.

‘Yes ...’ Ted looks at her sideways. ‘Except ...’

‘What?’

‘It’s headless.’

‘What?’

‘There’s no head. Trace and I are both sure.’

Ruth looks again at the bones. She can see the vertebrae and the tail wrapped neatly around the feet but ... no head.

‘Log it,’ she says. ‘I’ll take the bones back to the lab.’

‘Wonder what we’ll find next?’ says Ted cheerily. ‘The Headless Horseman?’

Ted’s good humour, thinks Ruth, as she trudges back to her trench, is starting to get her down.

*

In the afternoon, Clough puts in an appearance. ‘The boss has gone down to Sussex to interview some priest who used to run this place,’ he explains.

‘Pin it on the pervert priest,’ says Ted, taking a swig from his flask, ‘good idea.’

Ruth feels rather embarrassed that she and the others have been caught on their tea break but Clough joins them readily enough, accepting a Jammy Dodger from Trace and a mug of coffee from Ruth. They are sitting on a low internal wall, still covered with wallpaper, dark red with a faint black pattern.

‘Boss turns out to be a left-footer,’ says Clough. ‘Did you know that?’ he turns to Ruth.

‘A left ...? Oh, a Catholic. No. Why should I?’ She doesn’t want Clough to think she knows Nelson all that well.

‘We’ve found some other people who worked here. Ordinary people, not priests or nuns. Even tracked down some of the residents. It’s going to be a hard job taking all the statements.’

‘Won’t you get overtime?’ asks Ruth drily.

‘Oh yes,’ Clough grins, ‘thank God for overtime. Anyway, you find out any more about the skeleton?’

‘No,’ says Ruth patiently. ‘As I explained yesterday, I need to examine it thoroughly in context before we can take the bones away.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘I’m hoping to finish tomorrow. I’ve got to bag and record all

the bones and take soil samples.'

'That long? Just for a few bones?'

'There are two hundred and six bones in the human body,' says Ruth tartly, 'and about three hundred in a child's.'

'Oh well.' Clough stands up, brushing crumbs from his chinos (like Nelson, he wears plain clothes – very plain in Nelson's case). 'Better get back to the ranch. No peace for the wicked.'

A cliché, like many of Clough's utterances but as Ruth goes back to work in her trench she finds the phrase reverberating in her mind. No peace for the wicked. Were these bones at peace? Is she now disturbing them? Did something wicked happen here, however many years ago? Did somebody kill this child? And what about the cat?

No peace for the wicked. Cathbad would say that places retain memories of evil. This site is spooky enough, with its half-ruined Gothic walls, its grandiose arch, the staircases and doors leading to nowhere. Cathbad would also say that Ruth should be careful, disturbing the dead, meddling with the past. But that is her job. She is a forensic archaeologist. It is her job to excavate the body and discover clues from the bones, from the burial, from the very texture of the earth. It is all very straightforward and there is nothing to get excited about.

Nevertheless, when the light starts to fade and Ted and Trace pack up their tools, Ruth goes with them. Being sensible is one thing; staying on the site after dark is another.

CHAPTER 9

‘So you were resident at the Sacred Heart Children’s Home for how long?’

‘Three years. I came when I was thirteen. I left when I was sixteen. Father Hennessey got me an apprenticeship. I owe him everything really.’

The speaker, a mild-looking man in his forties, looks at Nelson and smiles. Nelson forces himself to smile back. This is the third ex-resident of the children’s home who has offered an unsolicited testimonial to the kindness of Father Hennessey. As Clough put it, half an hour ago, ‘perhaps the buggers have been brainwashed.’

While Nelson and Clough are interviewing former residents of the children’s home, Detective Constable Judy Johnson, another of Nelson’s team, is on her way to interview Sister Immaculata, a nun who used to work at the home and is now in a Southport old people’s home. As Nelson hates Southport and Clough hates nuns, it was considered that this visit needed ‘a woman’s touch’.

‘Mr Davies,’ Nelson leans forward, ‘during your time at the home was there any ill-treatment of inmates ... sorry, residents.’

‘No, never,’ Davies answers. Too quickly? wonders Nelson.

‘No corporal punishment?’ asks Clough. ‘Quite common in the seventies.’

‘No,’ says Davies quietly, ‘Father Hennessey believed in kindness.’

‘What about the nuns? The sisters. Could they be strict?’

Davies considers. ‘They could be strict, yes. No physical violence but some of them had sharp tongues. A few were kind. Sister James. Sister Immaculata. But some of the others ... they were good women but not kindly women, if you know what I mean.’

‘So what were the punishments for bad behaviour?’ persists Nelson.

Davies smiles. ‘Well, for really bad behaviour you got sent to Father Hennessey but that usually turned out to be more of a treat than anything else. He’d get you to help clear out his cupboards or weed the kitchen garden. Some of my happiest memories of SHCH are of working on that garden.’

Nelson sighs and changes tack. 'Did you know two children called Black? Martin and Elizabeth Black.'

Davies frowns. He has an anxious, squashed-looking face at the best of times. Now his face is positively pleated in thought. 'Yes,' he says at last, 'they went missing. It was just after I came to SHCH. Martin was about a year younger than me. He was very clever, I remember.'

'Do you remember anything about their disappearance?'

'Well, there was a big to-do at the time. We used to have a free hour at the end of the day and I remember that I'd actually been talking to Martin. There was a craze for collecting football cards and we were filling in our scrapbooks. Elizabeth was there too, playing with some stuffed animal. A dog, I think it was. She took it everywhere with her. After a while she wandered off and Martin went to find her. That was the last I saw of him. Then one of the sisters rang the bell for bedtime and they were nowhere to be seen.'

'What happened next?'

'Father Hennessey went out to search. Then he must have called the police. I remember being interviewed, being asked when I last saw Martin and Elizabeth. The police were around for a few weeks, asking everyone questions. I remember Sister Immaculata being angry because they interrupted us when we were saying the rosary. Then everything went back to normal. We still prayed for Martin and Elizabeth but we didn't really talk about them. We forgot. You know what kids are like.'

'When the police were at SHCH, do you remember them searching the grounds? Digging?'

'No,' says Davies slowly, 'I don't remember them digging.' He looks up suddenly. 'Is that what all this is about? Have you found a body?'

'I'm not at liberty to say,' says Nelson.

'They're knocking it down, aren't they?' says Davies. 'I walked past the site the other day.'

'They're developing it, yes.'

'It's a shame. It was a lovely house. Like a mansion, I always thought.'

'Yes.' Nelson looks at Clough. 'Mr Davies, would you be prepared to come to the site and look around? You might be able to tell us where things were. Which rooms were which, that sort

of thing.'

'Yes,' says Davies, 'I'd be happy to.'

He gets up to leave, shaking hands with both policemen. At the door, Clough asks, 'You say Father Hennessey got you an apprenticeship. What trade was that?'

Kevin Davies smiles, the creases in his face turning upwards. 'Oh, I thought you knew. I'm an undertaker.'

*

Judy Johnson is pushing a wheelchair along Southport seafront. The tide is out and the sand stretches into the far distance, bands of gold and white and silver, dotted with tiny figures carrying nets and buckets. As she watches, three racehorses canter into view, their necks arching as they fight their bits, the sand flying up behind them. Judy stops for a second and Sister Immaculata turns and says, 'Red Rum was trained here. Did you know that?'

'No.'

'I had a bet on him in 1976. That was the year he came second. Typical.'

'Was it each way?' asks Judy, a bookie's daughter.

'No, on the nose. Typical.'

The horses are galloping now, stretching out joyfully across the sand, manes and tails flying. The jockeys hover over their necks, seemingly balanced in mid-air. Judy had wanted to be a jockey once. Before she got interested in boys.

The old people's home turns out to be a convent that looks after aging nuns. The sister in charge suggested that Judy take Sister Immaculata out 'for a walk'.

'That way she'll get fresh air and you can have some privacy.' A mixture of kindness and absolute authority that Judy remembers from her own (convent) schooldays.

Judy stops by a bench, puts the brakes on the wheelchair and goes to sit beside the elderly nun. She knows from the police records that Sister Immaculata (real name: Orla McKinley) is seventy-five but the veil covering her hair and her high-necked habit serve to mask the most obvious signs of age. Her face is curiously unlined, the blue eyes still sharp. Only the hand, pointing now at Southport Pier, betrays its owner's age. It's a mummy's hand, skeletal and misshapen.

‘Sister Immaculata,’ begins Judy, ‘you worked at the Sacred Heart Children’s Home from 1960 to 1980.’

‘It wasn’t work, it was a vocation,’ says the nun sharply.

‘I’m sorry. But you were resident at the home?’

‘Yes.’

‘What sort of a place was it?’

Sister Immaculata is silent, looking out over the miles of pale sand. But Judy notes that her hands are shaking slightly. Age? Infirmary? Or fear?

‘It was a beautiful house. Lovely grounds. The sort of place where you can’t imagine bad things happening.’

Judy holds her breath. She mustn’t mess this up. The boss expects her to get results. That’s why she has been sent instead of Clough, who’d probably have accused the nun of satanic abuse by now and be on his way for an early lunch.

‘What sort of bad things?’ she asks gently.

The nun looks at her sharply, eyes narrowed.

‘Two children vanished. Isn’t that bad enough for you?’

‘Martin and Elizabeth Black?’

‘Yes. They disappeared. Vanished. Into thin air.’

Judy shivers. It sounds a little like a fairy tale and she has always found these particularly terrifying. Two children go into the woods and bang! they are eaten by a wolf or enticed into a gingerbread house or given a poisoned apple by a close female relation. Vanished. Into thin air.

She struggles to make her voice sound businesslike. ‘How well did you know Martin and Elizabeth?’

Sister Immaculata seems to have recovered her poise. ‘I taught Martin,’ she says, ‘didn’t have much to do with the younger children. That was Sister James, God rest her soul. But I remember Martin. Father Hennessey thought the world of him but he was always trouble, in my opinion.’

‘In what way?’

‘He was clever. Very interested in history. Gladiators, dinosaurs, that sort of thing. Science too. He was always trying some far-fetched experiment. Father Hennessey encouraged him, even made a laboratory for him in the basement. Gave him books to read. But he was the sort of boy who used his intelligence to make trouble. Always asking questions in class. Sacrilegious questions about the Holy Ghost and the Blessed Virgin.’ She nods

her head in pious reflex.

‘What did Father Hennessey think about that?’

‘He made excuses for him. The children had a tragic start in life. Their mother died. The only other relative was a drunken father in Ireland. Martin was always talking about his father, making him out to be some sort of hero. That’s why, when they disappeared, we thought they might have gone to Ireland.’

‘Did it come out of the blue, their disappearance?’

‘Well, we thought Martin might have been plotting something. He’d been stealing food for weeks. Father Hennessey knew but he didn’t want to confront the boy, not until he knew what was in his mind. I think he regretted that later.’

‘What did *you* think?’ In Judy’s experience, everyone likes to be asked their opinion and it seems nuns are no exception to this rule.

‘I thought he needed a good hiding. But Father Hennessey wasn’t having any of that. No physical punishment, that was the rule. Not even a clip round the ear for cheekiness. Not like it was when I was at school.’ She broods for a minute, lower lip stuck out.

‘I told Father Hennessey that Martin Black was trouble but he wouldn’t have it. Just said the boy needed love and attention. Love and attention! Look where that got him. He ran off, taking his poor innocent sister with him. Probably got themselves killed.’

‘Is that what you think happened?’ asks Judy.

Sister Immaculata is silent for a moment and Judy sees now that she has a rosary in her hands. She is twisting the beads between her arthritic fingers. ‘Yes, I think that’s what happened. The world is a dangerous place for children.’

‘What did Father Hennessey think?’

Sister Immaculata looks her full in the face, the blue eyes slightly amused. ‘Haven’t you worked it out yet, girl? Father Hennessey is a saint. And saints cause a lot of trouble for the rest of us.’

CHAPTER 10

Ruth is excavating the bones. The skeleton has been completely exposed, has been drawn and photographed from all angles. Now, it is Ruth's job to remove the bones themselves so that they can go to the post-mortem. She moves calmly, placing each bone in a labelled bag and then checking it against what she calls her 'skeleton sheet', recording the measurement and appearance of each fragment. Respect and care, that's what she tells her pupils. Human bones, however old, should be treated with all the respect that you would give to a body. Excavation should take place over one day so that no fragments are lost or stolen. Every bone should be saved, recorded and preserved. Ruth has worked on sites, like the war graves in Bosnia, where many skeletons are mixed together. Then, the process of trying to separate and record is an arduous one. But this is just one skeleton, one little body. Ruth handles the bones with tenderness, reverence even.

Irish Ted has already bagged the bones of the cat. She will take them to the lab on her way home. Neither cat nor human skull has been found.

'Good day.' The voice is so close that Ruth jumps. She looks up and sees a good-looking man of about her age, immaculately dressed in a cotton shirt and linen trousers. With him is an older man in a panama hat. Ruth straightens up, shielding her eyes with her hand.

The younger man squats down as if he is about to jump into the trench. Ruth is horrified. Like most archaeologists, she likes to keep her trench immaculate. Standing in someone's trench is like walking uninvited into their house.

'Stop!' she says sharply.

The man looks at her quizzically.

'You can't come into the trench,' says Ruth, struggling to keep her voice polite, 'you'll contaminate it.'

The man straightens up. 'We haven't been introduced,' he says, as if the introduction will make all the difference. 'I'm Edward Spens.'

That figures. The famous Edward Spens no doubt considers that Ruth's trench, like the rest of the site, belongs to him.

‘Ruth Galloway.’ Ruth forces herself to smile up at him. She feels at a disadvantage being so low down.

‘So these are the fateful bones.’

Fateful, thinks Ruth. It’s a funny way of describing the find but somehow appropriate. She sees Spens’ intelligent eyes fixed on her face. She must be careful not to give too much away.

‘This is the skeleton, yes.’

‘And have you any idea how old it is?’

‘Not yet. We might find some clues in the fill.’

‘The fill?’

‘The grave,’ says Ruth, thinking how emotive the word is. But that is what they have found: a grave, where a body is buried.

‘We might find bricks or pottery,’ she explains. ‘I thought I saw a shard from a bottle. That can be dated. And we’ll do radiocarbon dating, though that’s less useful when dealing with a modern skeleton.’

‘What exactly does radiocarbon dating involve?’ Edward Spens smiles down charmingly.

‘It tests the amount of carbon in the bones. When we’re alive, we take in carbon fourteen. When we die, we stop. By estimating when these bones stopped taking in carbon fourteen, we’ll be able to estimate the age of the skeleton.’

‘Fascinating. How accurate is it?’

‘To about plus or minus five per cent.’ Then, relenting slightly, ‘Other factors affect the carbon dating but we can be accurate to about a hundred years.’

‘A hundred years! That’s not very accurate.’

‘There are other indicators,’ says Ruth, slightly irritated. ‘Recent bones still contain blood pigment and amino acids, for example. We’ll be able to tell if these remains are medieval or relatively modern.’

The older man, who has been looking around him with every appearance of pleasure, now says, ‘You know this used to be a church?’

‘My father, Sir Roderick Spens,’ introduces Edward. ‘He’s very interested in history.’ He says this in a resigned way, as if ferrying his elderly father to sites of archaeological interest is not his preferred way of passing the time.

Roderick Spens doffs his hat with a flourish. ‘Delighted to meet you.’

Ruth smiles. She thinks she prefers Sir Roderick's interest to Edward's barely concealed impatience.

'They say that a church used to stand here,' Roderick Spens explains. 'Probably destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries, gravestones broken up, stained glass smashed, gold and silver melted down.'

Ruth thinks of the workman smashing the windows in the conservatory and the momentary regret she had felt for those coloured pieces of glass, for the destruction of anything that was once prized. 'We found a chalice yesterday,' she says, 'probably 1400s or thereabouts. Some beautiful work on it.'

Sir Roderick's eyes gleam. 'Now that I'd like to see.'

'It's back at the university,' says Ruth, 'but I'm sure we could arrange—'

'Now, Dad,' says Edward warningly, 'we don't want to bother Miss Galloway.'

'Dr Galloway,' corrects Ruth mildly, 'and it's no bother.'

'Strange to think, Dr Galloway,' the older man leans forward, deliberately, it seems, excluding his son, 'that this church was destroyed by Henry the Eighth yet later became a Catholic children's home.'

'Yes.' Ruth is not particularly interested in the age-old struggle between Catholic and Protestant. To her, all religions are as bad as each other. Though at least Catholicism has nicer pictures.

'Do the police think these bones are linked to the home?' asks Edward.

'As far as I know they're keeping an open mind,' says Ruth. 'Now if you'll excuse me ...'

She turns back to the bones and, after a second or two, Edward Spens takes his father by the arm and leads him away.

*

Nelson does not arrive until late afternoon, by which time Ruth has finished cataloguing the bones and is helping Trace in one of the trenches at the back of the house. They have found some Roman pottery and what looks like a signet ring. So this site, like the one on the hills, was also once Roman. Hardly surprising, thinks Ruth, and yet the link disturbs her slightly.

Nelson is accompanied by Clough and a sandy-haired man with

a furrowed brow under his hard hat. Clough, Ruth is interested to note, peels off immediately to talk to Trace. Nelson and the other man approach Ruth.

‘Dr Ruth Galloway,’ Nelson’s introductions are always brusque, ‘Kevin Davies. Mr Davies was once resident at the Sacred Heart Children’s Home.’

‘I’m afraid there’s not much left of the original building,’ says Ruth. And there will soon be less, if Edward Spens has his way.

Davies has a misty, far-away look about him. ‘This was the conservatory,’ he says, ‘and over there we had a swing and a tree house. There was a wishing well too. We used to play football on the lawn. Father Hennessey was a really good player. He could have been a professional.’

Nelson rolls his eyes. The last thing he needs is to be told that Father Hennessey, on top of all his other virtues, was Norfolk’s answer to Pelé.

‘Do you remember a pet cemetery?’ ask Ruth. ‘Or anywhere where pets might have been buried.’

Davies looks at her with mild blue eyes. ‘No. Sister James was allergic to animals so we couldn’t even have a cat. We had a canary though. Lovely cheerful little thing.’

‘Why don’t you have a look round, Mr Davies,’ says Nelson. ‘Refresh your memory.’

Davies wanders off and Ruth climbs out of the trench. She sees Nelson looking at her strangely and realises that she must, by now, be both sweaty and mud-stained. Well, there’s not much she can do about it. Her back is killing her too.

‘If I have to hear once more that Father Hennessey is a saint who walks on water in his spare time, I’m going to go mad,’ says Nelson as they walk away from the trench.

‘Bit of a fan, is he?’ asks Ruth, indicating Davies, who is staring at the ruins of the kitchen garden with a rather shell-shocked look on his face.

‘A fan! According to him Father Hennessey is a combination of Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela and Winnie-the-bloody-Pooh.’

Ruth laughs. ‘Have you met him, this Father Hennessey?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s he like?’

Nelson hesitates. ‘Seems a nice enough chap. Big, strong man he must have been when he was young. Strong character too, I

think. Razor sharp.'

'So, any suspicious deaths at the children's home?' asks Ruth lightly. To her surprise, Nelson answers soberly, 'Yes.'

'Really?'

'Well, a disappearance. Two children. Martin and Elizabeth Black. Vanished without a trace in 1973.'

'How old?'

'Twelve and five.'

They look at each other, thinking of the little skeleton under the door.

'Do you think it's her?' asks Ruth.

'It's possible, isn't it?'

Ruth thinks of the size of the bones. 'Yes. But that would mean ...'

'That she was killed by someone at the home? Yes.'

'Do you really think that might have happened?'

'Well, we won't know until you've done your dating but ... I don't know, Ruth. There's something funny about this place. Something's not right. Something smells funny. And what was all that about a pet cemetery?'

'We found the skeleton of a cat buried by the back wall.'

'Probably just the final resting place of some old moggy.'

'Its head was cut off. No sign of the skull.'

Nelson whistles soundlessly. 'Bloody hell. Do you think there's any connection?'

'Probably not but I'll have a look at the bones back at the lab.'

'This case gets wackier and wackier.'

'Well,' says Ruth, not wanting to be drawn, remembering her ridiculous fears yesterday, 'there could be all sorts of explanations for the bones. In fact, considering that there was supposed to be a churchyard somewhere around here, it's surprising we haven't found more.'

'But a decapitated cat,' Nelson raises his eyebrows, 'that doesn't strike you as odd?'

'There's sure to be a logical explanation,' persists Ruth. Nelson is still looking at her oddly. She can feel herself going red. Ruth has always had trouble with blushing and it seems to have got worse during the last few weeks. Feeling the blood pumping into her cheeks, she ducks her head. 'Edward Spens was here earlier,' she says. 'With his dad.'

At least this diverts Nelson's attention away from her. He kicks viciously at an upended paving stone.

'Interfering bastard,' he says. 'What did he want?'

'To interfere, I suspect. His dad was sweet though. Very interested in history. He was talking about the church that was meant to have been here.'

'Father Hennessey mentioned it too. Said it used to cure lepers.'

Ruth thinks of St Hugh's decapitated skull, performing miracles on its own, of St Bridget's cross, holy fires and sacred wells. Fairy tales all of them but, like fairy tales, curiously compelling.

'They're Catholics, you know,' says Nelson suddenly, 'the Spens family. Edward Spens was telling me. His grandfather converted sometime in the fifties.'

'I thought there was something odd about him,' says Ruth.

They are walking back towards the archway, where Kevin Davies is now standing, looking sadly at the devastation all around him. Ruth stops and takes a gulp from her water bottle.

Nelson puts his hand on her arm. 'Are you all right?'

The sudden kindness in his voice makes the blood rush to her head again.

'Fine,' she snaps, 'just hot.'

'Hot?' says Nelson. 'It's never hot in Norfolk.' And he bounds away across the rubble.

11th June

Day sacred to Fortuna Virgo

I suppose I have always known that I am special. Even before all this happened and the curse fell upon us, I always knew that the Gods had something special in store for me. It's not just that I am clever (though my Intelligence Quotient is in excess of 140), it is more that I understand. When I read Pliny or Catullus the gods are not just names to me, they are real. Their power and might overshadows all that comes after – the puny love-feast of Christianity, the ridiculous modern gods of horoscopes and hypnotism and the moving pictures. The Roman gods are logical and that is why I like them. If you kill, you must make amends in blood, a life for a life. Blood can be cancelled out but only by blood. The gods demand their sacrifices but, unlike modern gods, they do not demand more than their due. If you sacrifice correctly, the past is wiped out, made clean.

Soon I will be alone in the house (well, apart from the women and children who do not count) and then maybe I will have the chance to do what must be done. In the meantime I must keep my strength up, eat healthily, more meat and less potato. Caesar himself would not have been able to function on the diet I eat. Must speak to Cook about this.

CHAPTER 11

By the time Ruth gets in her car, her back feels like it is splitting in two. She wedges her jumper at the base of her spine and thinks that it is only a matter of time before she has a little corduroy lumbar cushion and thus becomes officially middle-aged.

She drives to the university to drop off the animal bones. As she gets the box out of the car she wonders whether lugging bones about is ideal behaviour for a pregnant woman. Funny but they don't mention that in the books. Ruth estimates that she is now thirteen weeks pregnant. She is having a scan next week which should, apparently, give a more accurate date. Maybe then, at last, the whole thing will start to seem real.

She is so deep in thought that she doesn't notice the white-coated figure coming in the other direction.

'Sorry!'

Thank goodness, she doesn't drop the box but the effort causes her to fall to her knees. The white-coated man helps her up.

'Ruth! Are you OK?'

It is Cathbad.

When he is in his full Druid outfit, complete with flowing purple cloak, Cathbad can look impressive, even magnificent. Now, with his greying hair drawn back in a ponytail, white coat, jeans and trainers, he looks like any other ageing hippy who has finally found a nine-to-five job. Ruth is pleased to see him though. Despite everything, she is fond of Cathbad.

'I'm all right.' She gets to her feet rather slowly, annoyed to find herself slightly out of breath.

'Are you taking those to the lab? I'll help you.'

Ruth hands over the box though still keeps hold of her precious rucksack. 'Did you get my email?' asks Cathbad as they walk along the deserted corridor. It is nearly six o'clock and most of the students, and a lot of the lecturers, have gone home.

'About Imbolc? Yes.'

'Are you going to come?'

'Yes. Is it OK if I bring a friend?'

'Of course. The beach belongs to everyone.'

He smiles modestly but Ruth knows that Cathbad regards this

particular stretch of beach, where the henge was discovered, as very much his personal property.

‘He’s an archaeologist. I think you’ll like him.’

‘Is he the chap from Sussex? I’ve heard good things about him.’

Impressed by Cathbad’s spy system (or sixth sense), Ruth asks, ‘What have you heard?’

‘Oh, that he’s got an open mind. That he’s respecting the spirits. That sort of thing.’

Ruth wonders which spirits Cathbad means. Earth spirits, nature spirits, household spirits – there’s a wealth of choice for the truly open-minded. She decides not to enquire further. They have reached the lab and Ruth locks the animal bones in the safe. Tomorrow she will clean them and examine them further.

Cathbad is waiting for her outside. ‘You look tired,’ he says as they walk back towards the car park.

‘I’ve had a long day. Been working on site.’

‘Even so,’ Cathbad reaches out to take her rucksack, ‘you ought to be careful, in your condition.’

Ruth stops dead. The rucksack, which she had not quite relinquished, falls to the floor.

‘*What* did you say?’

Cathbad looks back at her innocently. ‘Just that you should be careful. Especially in the early months.’

Ruth opens her mouth and then shuts it again. ‘How did you know?’

‘It’s fairly obvious,’ says Cathbad, ‘to the trained eye.’

‘Since when have you had a trained eye?’

‘Well, I’m a scientist,’ says Cathbad, sounding offended, ‘and an observer.’

‘And you guessed just from observing me for a few minutes?’

‘Well, I saw you the other day on campus and I thought ... maybe. When I saw you today, I was sure.’

Ruth does not like the implications of this. If Cathbad has noticed, who else has realised? Phil? Her colleagues? Nelson?

‘How far on are you?’ Cathbad asks chattily, as they push through the swing doors.

‘Thirteen weeks.’

‘Lovely.’ Cathbad is obviously doing the sums. ‘A Scorpio baby.’

‘If you say so.’ Ruth is never sure which star sign is which. She is Cancer, home-loving and caring according to the books, which

proves that it's all crap. They have reached Ruth's car and Cathbad hands over the rucksack.

'Thanks.' Ruth slings it into the back seat. 'See you on Friday.'

'Yes,' says Cathbad. 'Tell me, Ruth, does Nelson know?'

'Does Nelson know what?'

'About the baby.'

Ruth looks hard at Cathbad who stares guilelessly back. There is no one on earth who knows about her night with Nelson.

Cathbad must surely be fishing in the dark.

'No. Why should he?'

'No reason.' Cathbad raises his hand in a cheery gesture of farewell. 'Take care of yourself, Ruth. See you on Friday.'

*

After her brush with Cathbad's sixth sense, Ruth is in the mood for solitude as she negotiates the narrow road across the marshes. But even from a distance she can see that she has company. A low-slung sports car is parked by her gate and a flash of brilliant red hair is visible in the driving seat.

Shona. Once Shona was Ruth's closest friend in Norfolk, perhaps her closest ever friend. But then the Saltmarsh case came up and, along with everything else in Ruth's life, her friendship with Shona was thrown into disarray. Ruth discovered things about Shona's past that made her wonder if she had ever really known her friend at all. Worse, she felt betrayed. But somehow they have survived. Shared grief over Erik, a shared sense of regret and a desire to salvage something positive from that terrible time, have drawn them together again. Perhaps they are not quite as open with each other as they once were. Ruth can't forget that Shona lied to her, by omission at least, for almost ten years. Shona feels that Ruth judged her too harshly for those lies. But they need each other. Neither has another close confidante and friends are precious. Ruth's slight sense of irritation at the disruption of her solitude has almost dissipated by the time that she has parked her car behind Shona's.

'Where have you been?' Shona hugs her. She is wearing a witchy green dress that billows in the wind from the sea. Her hair flies out in fiery points. Shona's beauty sometimes makes Ruth feel almost angry; at other times it makes it possible to forgive

her anything.

‘At the university.’

‘You work too hard.’

Shona is also a lecturer at the university, in the English department. Over the past ten years she has embarked on a series of disastrous affairs with married colleagues and is currently involved with Ruth’s boss, Phil. Ruth hopes that she is not in for an in-depth analysis of Phil’s prowess as a lover and the likelihood of his leaving his wife. The thought of making love to Phil would make her feel sick even if she wasn’t pregnant and in her opinion his marriage to Sue, a dull aromatherapist, will endure for ever.

Ruth opens the door and fends off an ecstatic Flint. Shona bends down to stroke the cat. She has often looked after him when Ruth is away.

‘Hallo, darling, come to Auntie Shona. Ruth, I’m going to give up men and buy a cat.’

Ruth has heard this many times before. ‘Cats aren’t so good at mending the Christmas lights. Or checking the oil in cars.’

‘No, but they’re better listeners.’ Shona cuddles Flint who stares hopefully at the floor.

‘True. And they don’t leave the loo seat up.’

Shona sits on the sofa with her feet curled under her. She looks like someone preparing for a long, cosy chat. Ruth offers tea but Shona says she’d prefer a glass of wine. Ruth puts some crisps in a bowl and stuffs a handful in her mouth before bringing them through to the sitting room.

‘Phil says you’ve found a skeleton,’ says Shona.

‘Well, the field team found it. It’s on a building site in Norwich.’

‘The field team. Is that the mad Irishman?’

‘Ted. Yes. He’s not Irish though, is he? Why’s he called Irish Ted?’

Shona’s eyes gleam. ‘It’s a long story. So, the body. Any signs of foul play?’

Ruth hesitates, Shona is always interested in a good story. Maybe that’s what comes of being a literature expert. Ruth is less sure about her discretion. The last thing she wants is Shona telling everything to Phil in some steamy pillow-talk session. On the other hand, she badly wants to talk to someone.

The head has been chopped off,' she says.

'No!' Shona is agog. 'Is it a ritual killing then?'

Ruth looks curiously at Shona. Strange that this should be Shona's first question. Or maybe not strange coming from someone so closely involved with Erik, that expert on ritual, sacrifice and bloodshed. She doesn't think that most people would immediately connect a headless body with ritual.

'Maybe,' she says. 'The Romans sometimes made sacrifices to Janus, the God of doorways. This body is under a door.'

'Is it Roman then?'

'We won't know until we've done the dating. It could be Roman or medieval but I don't think so. The grave cut looked modern.'

'Janus. Was he the guy with two faces?'

'Yes. The God of beginnings and endings. January is named after him.'

Shona shivers. 'Sounds creepy. But, then again, a lot of men are two-faced.'

'How's Phil?'

Shona smiles, rather sadly. 'Pour us a glass of wine and I'll tell you.'

Ruth pours two glasses of wine and hopes that Shona won't notice how slowly she drinks hers. Wine makes her feel sick these days. It's almost as if her taste buds can separate the drink into its component parts: acidic grapes, fermenting alcohol, a hint of vine leaves. She can almost taste the peasants' feet.

Phil, it seems, has been showing his unpleasant face to Shona. He wants her to come away with him to a conference in Geneva but is insisting that they travel separately and that she pays her own fare. Ruth hides a smile. Phil's stinginess is a standing joke in the department. Apparently he says he loves Shona but has taken to referring to his wife's 'fragility', as if it will be Shona's fault if anything happens to upset her.

'I wouldn't mind but she's as strong as a horse. Looks like a horse too. An unattractive horse ... Ruth, why aren't you drinking?'

Ruth looks guiltily at her glass. Shona has emptied hers but Ruth has only managed a few queasy sips.

'Are you OK?'

Everyone seems to be asking her that, thinks Ruth. She suddenly feels a great urge to tell Shona about her pregnancy.

People are going to have to know sometime. Cathbad has already guessed. Maybe everyone is talking behind her back. And she'll need an ally when she tells Phil. She takes a deep breath.

'Shona? I've got something to tell you.'

'What?' Shona is instantly alert, her eyes, with their long glittery lashes, fixed onto Ruth's face.

How to put it into words? 'I'm expecting a baby' sounds twee somehow. And she has a hard job thinking of the baby end of things. Better just be as factual as possible.

'I'm pregnant,' she says.

'What?'

Suddenly Ruth is scared of what she might see in Shona's face. She knows that Shona has been pregnant twice and has had two abortions. Will she see envy, hatred, resentment? She forces herself to look at Shona and sees, to her amazement, that there are tears in her eyes.

'I'm pregnant,' Ruth repeats.

Shona reaches over to touch Ruth's arm. 'Oh Ruth ...' she says tearfully. And then, 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I'm about thirteen weeks.'

'Thirteen weeks. Oh my God.' Shona wipes her eyes and seems to recover some of her equilibrium. Her expression is now straightforwardly curious. And she asks the question that Ruth dreads.

'Who's the father?'

'I'd rather not say.' This doesn't go down any better with Shona than it did with Ruth's parents. Shona flicks her hair impatiently.

'Oh, come on, Ruth. You can tell me. Is it Peter's?'

'I can't say.' Now Ruth feels herself getting tearful. 'Please.'

Shona leans over to give her a proper hug. 'I'm sorry. I'm just ... gobsmacked. Are you keeping it?'

'Yes.'

'That's brave,' says Shona quietly.

'Not really. I haven't thought it through. The implications, I mean. But I do want it. Very much,' she adds.

'You'll be a great mum! Can I be godmother?'

'In a strictly non-religious sense, yes.'

'I'll be its auntie. Like I'm Flint's auntie.' There is a distinctly brittle edge to Shona's laughter now.

'It'll need all the family it can get,' says Ruth. 'My parents have

more or less disowned me.'

'Really? Does that still happen? Everyone has babies now without being married. Even my mother wouldn't mind. And she's a mad Irish Catholic.'

'My parents are ... old-fashioned.'

'They must be.' Shona fiddles with her wine glass for a second before asking, 'Does Phil know?'

'No, not yet. I'll have to tell him soon, before it becomes too obvious. I saw Cathbad today and he guessed immediately.'

'Cathbad, really?' Shona knows Cathbad of old. They met on the henge dig all those years ago. Ruth remembers that Shona initially sided with the Druids who wanted to keep the henge in place rather than with the archaeologists who wanted to move it to a museum. She wonders what Phil, an establishment man to the core, thinks about Shona's newage leanings

'Perhaps the spirits told him?' suggests Shona.

'Perhaps.' Ruth remembers Cathbad saying that Max respected 'the spirits'. She has a sudden vision of a shadowy army hovering around, questioning, commenting and passing judgement. Funnily enough, they all look a bit like her mother.

'He's having a party on Friday,' she says.

'A party?'

'Well, a celebration. In honour of Imbolc, some Celtic thing about the coming of spring. He's organising a party on the beach. Do you want to come?'

Shona brightens up at the prospect of a party. 'Why not? A spot of satanic ritual's just what I need to cheer me up.'

CHAPTER 12

As it turns out, nothing could be less satanic than the Imbolc celebration on Saltmarsh beach. Some of Cathbad's colleagues have even brought their children who play happily on the sand, daring each other to jump over waves. Even the vast bonfire, constructed out of driftwood and old packing cases, seems more like something made by the PTA to raise funds for playground equipment than an offering to the pagan gods of fire.

Ruth and Max walk over the Saltmarsh, carrying offerings of wine and crisps. Though Max does not know it, they are following the path taken by Ruth and Lucy, that wild night in February, when the wind howled from the sea and the marsh shifted treacherously in the darkness. Sometimes it seems to Ruth as if that night was something that happened to someone else; she can think about it quite calmly, as if she is reading about it in a book. At other times, the memory is as sharp as if it happened yesterday: the flight across the marshes in the night, the moment when she knew that she was going to die, the dark wave coming from nowhere.

Now, though, the sky is palest blue and only a light, companionable breeze blows through the coarse grass. Ruth and Max take the path through the dunes and see the beach spread out before them; the silver line of the sea, the deep pools reflecting the evening sky, the miles upon miles of rippling sand.

'It's beautiful,' says Max. 'I'd forgotten how open it is in Norfolk. Nothing but sand, sea and sky.'

'Yes, it is beautiful,' says Ruth, pleased that Max appreciates her beloved Saltmarsh. 'It can be desolate in the winter but on evenings like this I think it's the loveliest place on earth.'

'I like the desolation too,' says Max, looking out towards the retreating tide. The seagulls are swooping low over the waves and the shouts of the children seem thin on the evening air.

Ruth looks at him curiously. She knows what he means. Sometimes the Saltmarsh's sheer loneliness and splendour gives her a thrill of almost sexual pleasure. But she hadn't expected Max to feel the same. Doesn't he come from Brighton, where the beach is more about kiss-me-quick hats than desolate beauty? But

he was brought up in Norfolk, she reminds herself.

They walk towards the bonfire, very black against the white sand. Cathbad, wearing Druid's robes and the purple cloak is supervising the stacking of wood but when he sees Ruth he breaks away with arms outstretched.

'Ruth!' They hug and Ruth feels Cathbad's beard tickling her cheek.

'Cathbad, this is my friend Max.'

'Welcome!' Cathbad gives Max a two-handed 'vicar's' handshake. Indeed, in his white robes, he looks not unlike a priest greeting parishioners at the door of his church. Of course, Cathbad would say that this is just what the Saltmarsh is – a church, sacred ground. After all, man has worshipped here for hundreds, thousands, of years; first the Bronze Age people building their henge and then the Iron Agers who buried bodies and treasure at the point where the sea meets the land. It was one of these bodies that Ruth discovered last year.

'Good to meet you,' says Max. 'This is a wonderful spot.'

'Yes,' says Cathbad, looking closely at Max. 'This is a liminal zone, the bridge between life and death.'

'Erik Anderssen 1998,' says Max immediately. 'I love that book. Anderssen was one of my heroes when I was a student.'

Ruth can't stop herself exclaiming. 'Did you know Erik?'

'I never met him but I've read almost everything he ever wrote. No one has ever understood prehistory better.'

'He was a wonderful man,' says Cathbad. 'Ruth here was very close to him.'

'Were you?' Max turns to Ruth.

'Well, I was his student,' Ruth says guardedly. She still finds it hard to talk about Erik.

'His favourite student,' says Cathbad rather aggressively.

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'I wish I'd met him,' says Max lightly.

'We've brought booze,' says Ruth, wishing to turn the subject away from life and death.

'Great,' says Cathbad, 'the gods need their libation. Freya over there is in charge of drinks.'

Freya, a wispy blonde in blue robes, takes their bottles and stows them away carefully. She then offers them punch from a copper cauldron. Ruth sniffs suspiciously at her plastic cup as

they walk away.

‘What’s in this?’ she asks. ‘Battery acid?’

‘Well, you did say that he works in the chemistry department.’

‘He used to be an archaeologist, you know.’

‘Is that how he knew Erik?’

‘Yes. Erik was his tutor at university. Then they met again on the henge dig. You know, the one I told you about? Cathbad was one of the Druids protesting about us moving the timbers.’

‘You can see their point,’ says Max slowly, looking out across the expanse of sand, perhaps imagining the henge in place, the circle of wooden posts stark against the sky. As for Ruth, the image is so clear that she is surprised it hasn’t materialised in front of her, complete with Erik kneeling in the centre, rhapsodising about the preservation of the wood.

‘Erik sympathised,’ she says, ‘but the sea was getting closer all the time. It would have destroyed the henge in the end.’

Max smiles. ‘Destroyed or changed?’

For a second, Ruth thinks about the Latin motto on the archway at Woolmarket Street: *Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit*, everything changes, nothing perishes, and she feels a sudden chill, as if a cold hand has touched her shoulder.

‘You *are* a fan of Erik’s,’ is all she says. Erik believed in the cycle of change, decay and rebirth. Has he been reborn? Sometimes it seems impossible that Erik’s vibrant spirit can really have died alongside his body. Surely there’s some blue-eyed baby somewhere that is Erik having a second go at life. Or some water spirit maybe, some animal – a seal or a sleek arctic fox.

The bonfire is apparently completed. As the light fades Cathbad and the other Druids join hands and encircle it, chanting and singing. The children join in too, running in and out of the adults, laughing and excited. Max, Ruth and the other non-Druids stand nearby, torn between self-consciousness and interest. There is something magnificent about the spectacle, thinks Ruth, the tiny dark figures silhouetted against the sky, the towering bonfire and the faint crash of the waves in the background.

Cathbad has some trouble lighting his symbolic firebrand. The wind keeps whipping out the flame and, eventually, Freya has to shield him with her cloak. But finally he raises aloft the burning brand. ‘Goddess Brigid, accept our offering!’

Flames lick around the base of the bonfire. The children run

around, shrieking with excitement. The adults are chanting again but then someone starts to play the guitar and the chanting turns into something cosier, something more like a folk song. There is quite a crowd now. Ruth recognises lots of faces from the university and from the field team, including Ted and Trace. Slightly to Ruth's irritation, Max greets Trace enthusiastically. 'She's been working on the Swaffham site. She's a good archaeologist. Very knowledgeable about the Romans.'

'Mmm.' Ruth's appreciation of Trace's skills is not improved by the fact that she is looking rather stunning in a black T-shirt and black leather trousers. 'Let's go and sit down somewhere,' she says. Her back is killing her.

They sit in the shelter of one of the dunes, eating vegetarian hot dogs. Max has managed to annex one of the better bottles of wine and Ruth is drinking orange juice. Max doesn't comment on her abstemiousness. They talk about the two sites – the Roman excavation and the seventy-five luxury apartments – about the two decapitated bodies, about the Roman gods, particularly Janus, the two-faced God. 'He's also connected to the spring and the harvest,' says Max. 'He's not just the god of doorways but of any time of transition and change, of progression from one condition to another.'

'Is that because he can look backwards and forwards at the same time?'

'Yes, it also helped him pursue women, the nymph Carna, for example.'

'Did he catch her?'

'Yes, and in return for her favours he gave her power over all door hinges.'

Ruth laughs. 'So, instead of WD40 we should pray to Carna?'

'It's worth a try.'

Max pours more wine but Ruth has caught sight of a modern nymph, walking towards them across the sand. Shona, wearing a shawl and a flowing purple dress, accompanied by a very unwelcome acolyte – Phil.

'Ruth! What are you doing skulking here?'

Skulking, thinks Ruth, getting to her feet, is really a very unattractive way of putting it. She had been feeling rather good, lounging on the sand beside a good-looking and intelligent man. Now she feels foolish and somehow rather disreputable.

‘Hallo, Ruth,’ says Phil, too loudly. This is the first time Ruth has seen him in Shona’s company. This evening must represent some sort of ‘coming out’ as a couple. No wonder Shona looks so triumphant.

‘Hallo, Phil,’ says Ruth warily. ‘You remember Max Grey from Sussex? He’s the archaeologist in charge of the Swaffham dig.’

‘Yes, of course. How are you? Glad Ruth’s looking after you.’

This remark, like Shona’s, serves to make the whole evening seem ridiculous. Who is Phil to say that Ruth is ‘looking after’ Max? Why does he need looking after, anyhow?

‘I’m having a wonderful time,’ says Max, making things slightly better.

‘I’ve got no time for all this hippie nonsense,’ says Phil, ‘but Malone is a friend of Shona’s.’

‘Malone?’

‘Catweasel or whatever he calls himself.’

‘Cathbad,’ says Ruth between gritted teeth.

‘I hear he’s an ex-archaeologist,’ says Max.

‘Years ago,’ says Phil dismissively. ‘He works as a lab assistant now. He’s one of the airy-fairy type, believes in the symbolic landscape, ley lines, spirits of the ancestors, all that crap.’

Max says nothing. Ruth is pretty sure that he too believes in some of these things but it is in his interests to stay on the right side of Phil, who is partly funding the Roman dig.

It is nearly dark now. The Druids have planted burning torches in the sand and now the capering figures around the bonfire look monstrous and misshapen, their shadows black against the flames. The scent of wood smoke fills the air with acrid sweetness. Ruth realises that she is suddenly very tired. More than anything she wants to be home, in bed, with Flint flexing his claws against the duvet. But she is sure that Max won’t want to leave yet. How many more hours will she have to spend watching Cathbad throwing symbolic objects onto the fire? The last one was a University of North Norfolk sweatshirt; she dreads to think what this signifies.

She realises that Shona is talking to her, lowering her voice so that the men won’t hear. ‘He’s promised to leave his wife. What do you think of that?’

‘I’ve heard that one before,’ is what Ruth thinks. Aloud, she says, ‘Do you think he will?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Shona, draining her plastic glass. ‘I gave him an ultimatum. Her or me. He says I’m the most important thing in his life.’

Hence his presence here, guesses Ruth. A conciliatory gesture, appearing with Shona in front of this significantly insignificant group of people. She is sure that Phil would never accompany Shona to a departmental social or the Dean’s lecture. Equally, she is sure he will never leave his wife. Just as Nelson will never leave his.

‘Be careful,’ is all she says.

‘What do you mean?’ Shona tosses her hair, which glows as brightly as one of the torches in the darkness.

‘I’ve known Phil a long time. He says what he thinks you want to hear.’

Shona glares at her. Ruth is not sure what she would have said if Max hadn’t come over, placing a hand on Ruth’s arm. ‘Do you want to make a move?’ he says. ‘It’s getting a bit cold out here.’

Ruth agrees gratefully. With the disappearance of the sun, the night has got distinctly chilly. The wind is stronger too. Ruth pulls her jacket tightly around her but the Druids in their thin robes seem impervious to the cold. Their children too. As she and Max walk along the beach she can see them still playing in the near darkness. They have dug a deep hole and are chanting, ‘Ding Dong Dell, Pussy’s in the well.’

‘Some things never change,’ she says to Max as they make their way back to the path through the dunes. It is too dangerous to cross the Saltmarsh after dark; they must take the birdwatchers’ trail, a raised shingle path that leads back to the car park. Max has left his car there. Ruth hopes he will give her a lift home and won’t expect to come in for coffee.

‘Interesting rhyme,’ says Max in his tutorial voice. ‘It’s thought that Pussy refers to a prostitute.’

‘What are they doing, drowning her?’

‘Probably a version of a ducking stool.’

‘How does it go? “Who put her in? Little Johnny Green”.’

“Who pulled her out? Little Jimmy Stout”. Something like that.’

‘Who was Jimmy then? Her pimp?’

Max laughs. ‘I like you, Ruth,’ he says.

There’s no answer to that. ‘I like you too’ would sound

impossibly arch. Changing the subject would sound like a snub. And she does like him. How much, she doesn't really want to consider. It's all so *complicated*, that's the problem. She is pregnant with someone else's baby. That someone else is married and doesn't even know that she is pregnant. He will probably be furious when he finds out. Or will he maybe, just maybe, be pleased? Recently Ruth has been fantasising that the baby is a boy. Perhaps Nelson has always wanted a boy, will be delighted, will leave Michelle ... Hang on, though, does she even want him to leave Michelle? On balance, she doesn't. She would feel horribly guilty at breaking up the family and she is not sure if she ever wants to live with a man again. Especially a man as large as Nelson.

This is ridiculous anyway. Nelson doesn't love her and never has done. Their night together had been the result of a unique set of circumstances. They had just found the body of a dead child, Nelson had had to break the news to the family. For that one night it seemed as if Ruth and Nelson were alone in the world. Nelson had come to Ruth wanting comfort; the passion had surprised both of them. But Nelson has never, before or since, given any sign that he thinks of Ruth as anything other than a colleague, a fellow professional, perhaps even a friend. Why, then, is she thinking of him now, as Max takes her hand to help her over a stile? Does Max remind her of Nelson? He's a very different person; an academic, soft-spoken and courteous, but, physically, there is something. Like Nelson, Max has presence. It is not just that he is tall. It is more that, if he is in the room, you can't really look at anyone else. Phil faded into insignificance beside him and even Cathbad seemed several shades paler.

'Listen,' says Max suddenly, 'an owl.' They are passing the first hide. These wooden huts for birdwatchers are placed at strategic points on the marsh – this one is on stilts looking out over a freshwater lake. Ruth hears the wind whispering in the reeds and thinks for the hundredth, thousandth, time of that wild night on the Saltmarsh when an owl's call lured a man to his death. Around them lies water, dark and sullen, interspersed with marshy islands. Ruth shivers and Max makes a gesture as if he is going to put his arm round her but thinks better of it. 'Almost there,' is all he says.

The car park is pitch black and deserted apart from Max's

Range Rover. Inside it is blessedly warm and Ruth almost cries with happiness at the prospect of sitting down again. Is it normal for a pregnant person's back to ache this much? Perhaps it's because she's overweight.

Max negotiates the turn into the narrow road that leads to the cottages. He's a careful driver. In this respect, at least, he's nothing like Nelson.

'It was quite something, wasn't it?' he says. 'The bonfire and the Druids and everything.'

'Yes,' says Ruth, 'you can't go wrong with a fire for spectacle. I suppose that's why people used to worship it. Fire wards off the dark.'

'Like the cry of the cockerel,' says Max.

Ruth shoots him a curious look. 'Why do you say that?'

For a second Max looks straight ahead, squinting at the dark road. Then he says, 'Something that happened on the dig yesterday. I was just seeing off some sightseers. The Historical Society this time, I think. And I found a dead cockerel in one of the trenches.'

Ruth doesn't know what to say. She is dimly aware that the neighbouring farms might keep hens but she can't think how a bird can have wandered onto Max's site, isolated as it is behind its grassy bank.

'Was it left there deliberately?'

He gives a short laugh. 'I'd say so, yes. Its throat had been cut.'

'What?'

'Slit from side to side. Very neat job.'

For one awful moment Ruth thinks she is going to be sick. She takes a deep breath.

'Why would anyone want to do that?'

They have reached Ruth's cottage. Max turns off the ignition. 'Well a cockerel's a fairly traditional sacrifice. Because they crow in the morning, they're supposed to have power to hold back the darkness. That's what I meant earlier.'

Ruth's head is swimming. 'A sacrifice? Why would anyone leave a sacrifice on an archaeological dig?'

'I don't know. Maybe someone who believes that we're disturbing the dead.'

Briefly Ruth thinks of Cathbad and then shakes her head to clear it. Dead animals are not Cathbad's style.

‘Of course,’ Max goes on, ‘cockerels have a Christian connection too. The cockerel is sometimes used to represent Jesus. It’s the whole dawn rebirth thing.’

‘Someone killed a bird as a Christian sacrifice?’

Max’s voice changes gear slightly. ‘Or an offering to Hecate.’

‘The goddess of witchcraft?’

‘She was the goddess of many things. The Greeks called her the “Queen of the Night” because she could see into the underworld. She’s the goddess of the crossroads, the three ways. That’s why images of her are often in triplicate. She is meant to haunt crossroads, crossing places, accompanied by her ghost dogs. Another name is Hekate Kouroutrophos, Hecate the child-nurse. Women prayed to her in labour.’

‘Are cockerels traditionally sacrificed to her?’ Ruth tries to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

‘Well, it was black and it was traditional to sacrifice black animals to Hecate. Usually dogs or puppies because of her sacred dogs. But birds too occasionally. She’s sometimes linked to Athena and is depicted with an owl, the symbol of wisdom.’

‘We heard an owl earlier.’

Max smiles, his teeth very white in the darkness. ‘Maybe that was Hecate. She appears on marshland sometimes, shining her ghost lights to help you see your way.’

‘A will-o’-the-wisp,’ says Ruth, remembering another legend of spectral lights.

‘Exactly. Marsh lights. Phosphorescence. There are lots of stories about them.’

Ruth shivers. The time on the dashboard says 22:32. ‘I’d better be getting in.’

Max does not try to detain her nor does he mention coffee but, when she starts to open the door, he says ‘Ruth’ and, leaning over, kisses her on the lips.

*

Ruth goes straight to bed but as she lies cosily under her duvet with Flint purring loudly on her chest she finds that she can’t sleep. Instead words and phrases chase themselves crazily around her head. She turns one way and then the other (much to Flint’s irritation) but still can’t escape them. It’s a little like the half-

waking dreams that you get when you've drunk too much, which is very annoying considering she only had one sip of punch and drank orange juice for the rest of the evening.

She's the goddess of the crossroads, the three ways

He's promised to leave his wife. What do you think of that?

Does Nelson know?

... a liminal zone, the bridge between life and death

... everything changes, nothing perishes

Ding Dong Dell, Pussy's in the well

Then, suddenly, the voices vanish and she sees a mild, crushed-looking man who is gazing sadly at a ruined garden.

This was the conservatory, and over there we had a swing and a tree house. There was a wishing well too ...'

Ding Dong Dell, Pussy's in the well

Ruth sits up, throwing Flint onto the floor. Suddenly she knows, without any shadow of a doubt, where the skulls are hidden.

CHAPTER 13

They find the well at the back of the house, near the tree with the swinging rope. It is half-buried under one of the new walls which Nelson orders to be dismantled, much to the foreman's fury.

All that is left of the wishing well is a ring of bricks pressed into the soil. The hole has been filled with cement but Nelson thinks that this is only a cap, a few inches deep. Sure enough, it takes one of the workmen only a few minutes to break through with his pneumatic drill. Ruth peers into the void. Cold, dank air fills her nose and mouth but she can't see anything but darkness.

'How deep do you think it is?' asks Ted.

'Five or six metres,' says Nelson, 'possibly deeper.'

Nelson has a police diver on hand to climb down into the well. He is wearing a safety harness and is attaching a rope to a grappling hook.

'Why a diver?' asks Ruth. 'There's no water there now.'

'We can't be sure of that,' says Nelson. 'Because he's insured and we don't actually have a police wishing-well division.'

'I'll go down,' offers Ted, 'I'm into extreme archaeology.'

'No, you won't, sunshine,' says Nelson, 'you'll stay where I can see you.'

The diver climbs carefully into the shaft and disappears from view. For a few minutes, there is complete silence apart from a bird singing noisily in the tree.

Then a voice comes from the depths of the well, 'I've found something, sir.'

'What?' Nelson kneels on the edge and shouts downwards.

'A skull.'

'Don't hold it by the eye sockets!' squeaks Ruth, kneeling beside Nelson. 'They're very fragile.'

'I'm coming back up.'

The diver appears a minute later, carrying a skull carefully on the flat of his hand. He looks like an actor playing Hamlet in an experimental production (Shakespeare Meets Beckett perhaps?). Ruth takes the small skull in both her hands.

'Well?' says Nelson.

'It's a child's,' says Ruth quietly.

‘There’s something else down there, sir.’

‘Well, don’t hang about here chatting. Back you go.’

This time the diver emerges with what is clearly an animal skull.

‘The cat?’ asks Ted, leaning over Ruth’s shoulder.

‘Could be.’ Briefly, Ruth thinks of Hecate and wonders about the colour of the cat found buried under the outer wall. The goddess of witchcraft. Hecate the child-nurse.

They all stare at the two skulls, side by side on the tarpaulin. Ruth is thinking about head cults, about St Fremund washing his severed head in a well, about children’s bodies buried under the walls of temples. Nelson is thinking about Martin and Elizabeth Black. Did they never, in fact, run away? Does this skull belong to one of the missing children, murdered within the very grounds of the children’s home?

Ted breaks the silence. ‘Will the coroner want these?’

‘The human skull will go to the post-mortem, yes. I’ll take the animal skull back to the lab.’ Nelson watches as Ruth bags and labels the two skulls. The human skull is then placed in a special container marked, rather grimly, ‘Police Pathology’. This she hands to Nelson.

‘Will you be at the post-mortem?’ she asks.

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘I’ll see you there then.’

‘I’ll walk you to your car.’

Watched curiously by the others, they walk back through the grounds to where Ruth’s car is parked on the drive, under the shadow of the oak tree. The Druid’s tree, St Bridget’s tree, looks green and innocuous in the midday sun. Ruth opens her car boot and carefully places the box containing the cat’s skull inside. Nelson walks around the dusty Renault, kicking a loose hubcap into place.

‘How long will it take you to do your tests?’ he asks.

‘A few hours. Samples from the post-mortem will take longer.’

He makes his characteristic horse-pawing-the-ground movement. Nelson, Ruth knows, hates waiting for anything. But, then, still looking at the ground, he says, ‘I heard from Cathbad the other day.’

Ruth is instantly alert. ‘What did he want?’

‘Oh, to invite me to a lunatic beach party to celebrate some

pagan feast day.'

'And you didn't go?'

'No, I didn't think it was my sort of thing somehow. Or Michelle's.' He looks at her.

Ruth turns away on the pretext of closing the boot. 'You were probably right.'

'Did you go?'

'Yes.'

'On your own?'

Ruth stares. She can't believe he has asked this. 'No,' she says at last, 'with a friend. Max Grey.'

'Have a good time?'

'OK. There was a bonfire, lots of chanting, horrible food. You know the sort of thing.'

Nelson grins suddenly. 'Sounds like a Masonic meeting.'

'Are you a Mason then?'

'No, Cloughie is though.'

For a second they look at each other in silence and then Nelson says, with what sounds like fake heartiness, 'Well, mustn't stand here all day gossiping. See you at the postmortem.'

With this cheery salutation he heads off at top speed, almost colliding with Ted and the diver who are clearly off to the pub.

*

Ruth takes the animal skull back to the lab. The science block is deserted. There is an end-of-term party going on in the grounds, complete with beer tent and live bands. Ruth can hear the bass notes, like a giant heartbeat, and the occasional roar of beery applause. But the lecture rooms and laboratories are silent. No sign of Cathbad or any of the other lab technicians. Cathbad is probably at the party – he enjoys any kind of celebration, pagan or otherwise.

Watched by a poster showing diseases of the eye and by sundry silent bones in glass cases, Ruth gets out the skull and starts to clean it with a soft brush. Going by the shape and size, she is almost certain that it is a cat. The blunt edges of the neck bones show that the head has been removed roughly, probably by an axe. Looking at the cut marks under a microscope Ruth concludes that the head was removed after death. The marks clearly point

to cutting from the front. If the animal was still alive this would cause massive bleeding as it would mean sawing through the jugular. It is more likely that the cat was killed first and beheaded later.

Why? She has a million theories, none of them very likely. In so-called Celtic 'head cults' the head was often removed for religious or magical rituals. Placing the heads in the well certainly seems like a ritual act. Are the skulls Celtic then? She doesn't think so somehow.

It is growing darker outside and the party is getting more and more raucous. She can hear doors slamming as students run along corridors looking for deserted rooms where they can have sex or take drugs. Just as long as they don't come in here. The blue 'sterile conditions' light is on outside. That should deter them. She doesn't imagine that any of them are feeling particularly sterile.

Ruth's back is aching so she takes off her gloves and sits down to drink a glass of water. Looking at the little skull on the examination table, she suddenly feels unaccountably sad. She knows that the dead child is more important than the cat. The cat is simply a clue, an oddity, a slightly macabre detail. But even so, as she looks down on the thin little bones, Ruth feels a surge of pity. She lost her beloved cat, Sparky, earlier in the year and she still misses her. Probably this cat too was loved by someone. She sends a message back in time. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the things that humans do to animals.' She is aware that, in this very university, animals are experimented on every day (once or twice a year there are demonstrations from animal rights protesters and security is tightened) but, by and large, she accepts this as being necessary for the common good. But this – this is different.

Was the cat a sacrifice? Was it practice? Kill an animal first, work up to the ultimate horror of killing a child? What did Max say? 'It was traditional to sacrifice black animals to Hecate.'

On impulse Ruth goes over to the box containing the other evidence bags from the site. Bags of soil and vegetation for analysis, fragments of brick and stone and, yes, there it is ... She gets out the plastic bag containing the Roman signet ring. Carefully she tips the ring onto her hand. A handwritten label says 'Bronze ring with intaglio, probably Roman.' The device is hard to see, three slightly overlapping rings. 'Looks like a

shamrock,' Irish Ted had suggested, appropriately enough. But now, looking at it under the microscope, Ruth can see that the three circles are actually three heads.

Hecate. The three-headed goddess.

13th June

Ides

I am Agamemnon. I am the master of the house. Magister mundi sum. The responsibility is mine and, naturally, as the Master, I have certain duties. Did Agamemnon enjoy making the sacrifice demanded of him? No, but he did it just the same. Sometimes you just have to do what must be done. It is lonely being the master of the house and I wouldn't be human if I didn't wish that it could go back to the way it was. That I didn't have to do this thing. But the gods must be appeased. That's what no one understands. Agamemnon needed a fair wind for Troy. I need our walls to be safe. It comes to the same thing in the end.

CHAPTER 14

The police pathologist is young and exhaustingly enthusiastic. He is called Chris Stevenson and Ruth knows him only by sight. She knew the previous pathologist better; a charming old-world type who always wore a bow tie and velvet slippers. Stevenson bounds into the autopsy room on puffy American sneakers, his white coat flapping behind him. The old world is obviously gone for ever.

‘Dr Galloway! Come to give us your expert opinions?’

‘I’ll try,’ says Ruth tightly.

She knows that today’s post-mortem will be a battle. In a normal autopsy, Stevenson would be the expert. He is a flamboyant practitioner who likes, for example, to remove the internal organs in one block rather than in four groups, as is usual. Nelson describes a previous autopsy where Stevenson gestured so theatrically with his scalpel that two police probationers fainted. Stevenson also likes to talk all the time, a constant stream of information, observation and free-association chat in the manner of a Sunday morning DJ – albeit a DJ primarily concerned with blood, guts and medical incisions. Nelson loathes him, Ruth knows.

But, today, there are only bones – dry, academic bones. There is no need for any cutting or sawing or dramatic flourishes. And Ruth will be the expert. Stevenson will conduct the examination but he will be forced to defer to Ruth at every turn. No wonder his flow of humorous commentary has a slightly brittle edge this morning. Ruth says nothing. She is looking at the bones already laid out on the dissection table. Such a small skeleton. Such a little life.

Nelson arrives late, earning him a jokey ‘nice of you to join us’ from Stevenson.

‘Just get on with it,’ growls Nelson. He looks unfamiliar in his surgical scrubs, a plastic hat over his dark hair. Probably the most unflattering garments in the world, thinks Ruth, aware that she looks like a large green barrage balloon.

A technologist photographs the bones which have been laid out in an anatomically correct position. Then Stevenson begins his examination, barking his comments into a handheld recorder.

Ruth stands at the opposite side of the stainless steel table, taking each bone from Stevenson as he finishes with it and occasionally adding her own comments. Nelson stands behind Ruth, shifting from foot to foot like a restive horse.

‘... epiphyses still detached ... cartilaginous plate not yet ossified ... size of the long bones indicates a child ... would you say that it’s male or female, Dr Galloway?’

Ruth is looking at the pelvic bones. The female pelvis is shallower and broader than the male but this is not yet obvious in a pre-pubescent skeleton. She examines the sciatic notch, which is shorter and deeper in males. Again, this is barely detectable in a child.

‘Female, I’d say.’

‘Would you? That’s interesting.’ From this, Ruth concludes that Stevenson disagrees.

‘... trauma on sternum and third rib ... what would you say that was, Dr Galloway?’

‘Looks like a knife mark.’

‘A knife mark the lady says, we’ll see ...’

Stevenson turns to the skull. ‘External trauma to the cervical vertebrae ...’

An axe, thinks Ruth. The head was cut off with an instrument like an axe and, like the cat, it was done by cutting from the front.

‘Cause of death – decapitation?’ suggests Stevenson.

‘Poena post-mortem,’ says Ruth shortly, turning to Nelson.

‘Mutilation after death. The head was cut off later. It was cut from the front, death by decapitation is nearly always achieved by cutting from the back.’

Stevenson grunts. ‘Interesting theory. What do you think Detective Chief Inspector?’

‘Stabbed in the chest, beheaded. One thing’s certain; it sure as hell wasn’t suicide.’

Stevenson laughs, turning back to the skull. ‘No eruption of permanent teeth ...’ Ruth looks round at Nelson. No adult teeth – this means the skull is almost definitely less than six years old. ‘Filling on lower left first molar occlusal ...’

This is interesting. It proves for one thing that the body is relatively modern (although fillings apparently existed in ancient China, it is only in the last hundred years that they have been in

common use). Also, fillings are rare in such a young child. The composition will give valuable clues about dating.

Ruth leans forward.

‘Thoughts about the filling, Dr Galloway?’

‘I’d like a forensic dentistry expert to look at it.’

‘Anyone in mind?’

‘Yes.’

The examination is almost over. Stevenson takes samples for carbon-14 dating and Ruth fills in her skeleton sheets: post-cranial non-metrics, pathology, conclusions ... Her back aches from standing up so long but she doesn’t want to ask for a seat and risk Stevenson’s contempt and Nelson’s suspicion. Does he suspect? She can’t allow herself to think so.

‘Do you want a bet on the dating,’ asks Stevenson, ‘five years each way?’

‘No.’

‘Suit yourself. I’ll take some samples for DNA testing as well.’

‘Will you get any DNA?’ asks Nelson sceptically, looking at the dry bones.

‘Maybe,’ says Ruth, ‘but DNA can be damaged by immersion in earth. We may not get a good enough sample.’

‘We will,’ says Stevenson. ‘Well, show’s over, folks.’

In the ante-room, Ruth changes out of her scrubs and washes her hands thoroughly. Although there was no blood in this post-mortem she still feels grubby and slightly sordid. Maybe it’s just overexposure to Chris Stevenson.

Nelson’s head appears round the door. ‘Christ, thank God that’s over. Bloke’s a complete tosser. Fancy a coffee?’

Ruth hesitates. Though the thought of coffee makes her feel sick, she would like, very much to go to a cosy café with Nelson but she has something else she has to do this morning.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, ‘I’ve got an appointment.’

CHAPTER 15

‘Are you on your own?’

This is a question with so many layers that Ruth is momentarily struck dumb. She is manifestly on her own as she has presented herself at the hospital without anyone accompanying her. But she is doubly on her own as the father of her child does not even know she is pregnant. She thinks of Nelson as she saw him that morning, at the post-mortem, and tries to imagine him at her side, doting and supportive. No, it just doesn’t work. Even if Nelson did know, even if they were, in some unimaginable way, together, he would still spend his time looking at his watch and longing to be back at the station. What about her mum? She tries to picture her mother, cosy and smiling, offering advice and encouragement, telling her not to do too much and to eat ginger biscuits if she feels sick. No, even less likely. Shona? She would spend all her time flicking her hair about and making eyes at the doctors. Funnily enough, the only person she can actually imagine at her side is Cathbad. At least he’d be kind, although the purple cloak might prove a trifle embarrassing.

‘Yes. I’m on my own.’

The nurse ushers Ruth into a room with a bed and a contraption like a TV screen. Another woman stands by the screen, nonchalantly chewing gum. Ruth is reminded uncomfortably of the autopsy room. Only this time she is the body on the slab. Don’t be morbid, she tells herself. This is a perfectly routine procedure. So is an autopsy, persists the voice inside her head.

The nurse tells Ruth to undo her trousers, and rubs gel onto her stomach. Ruth squirms. She hates being touched on her stomach and avoids massages and beauty treatments like the plague. ‘Relax!’ she remembers a masseuse once saying to her. Eccentric she knows but, for Ruth, having some manicured stranger kneading your shoulder blades whilst chatting about their holidays is the very opposite of relaxing.

The other woman now places something like the end of a stethoscope onto Ruth’s stomach, pressing quite hard. Ruth has been told not to go to the loo before the scan and the pressure is

really very uncomfortable. For a second she feels like jumping off the bed and heading for the nearest Ladies. But then she sees that the screen is full of what look like wispy grey clouds. In the centre of the clouds something is moving.

Ruth has seen scans before – of bones and other archaeological objects. She knows that the high-frequency sound waves bounce off solid objects. She knows how to look at degrees of light and shade, to assess density and structure. But this – this is something quite different. This collection of dark circles, moving slowly on the screen, this is both completely incomprehensible and suddenly utterly real. This is her baby.

‘That’s the baby’s heart,’ says the woman, speaking for the first time and pushing the gum into the corner of her mouth. She points towards four black, pulsating circles.

‘That’s its spine.’ Ruth sees a slender white line moving across the screen. For some inexplicable reason, tears come to her eyes. Then she remembers something.

‘Can you tell if it’s a boy or a girl?’

‘Not at this scan. We’ll probably be able to tell at the next one, at about twenty weeks.’

But looking at the screen through swimming eyes, Ruth is convinced that the baby is a boy. There is something masculine, almost jaunty, about the little figure swimming around in her womb. The woman points at another part of the screen. ‘Long legs. Has your partner got long legs?’

Has Nelson got long legs? Ruth imagines him striding from place to place, impatient, eager to get to the next job. He is tall, presumably his legs are long. Longer than Ruth’s, certainly. Then, suddenly, it hits her for the first time. This baby is half his. Up until this point, she has thought of the baby as entirely hers, has even thought that it is the only thing in the world that is really hers. But it is not hers. For a second she sees the shape on the screen as completely alien – a male, a miniature Nelson. She closes her eyes.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes ... just a little sick.’

‘That’s OK. It often happens. We’re done anyhow.’ She hands Ruth some scratchy paper towels to clean her stomach and Ruth sits up slowly.

‘I’ll print off an image for you to take home.’

‘An image?’ Ruth looks at her blankly.

‘Of the baby! To show your partner.’

‘Oh, yes. Thank you.’

Ruth drives slowly back to the university, aware that she is doing the whole mirror/signal/manoeuvre thing with more care than at any time since her driving test. She keeps to the two-second rule and is so slow passing a bicycle that the car behind her hoots impatiently. She knows that she is driving like an old lady in a hat but she can't help herself. She is filled with the overwhelming realisation that she is carrying another human being inside her. A human being, moreover, with its own personality and its father's long legs. She is its vehicle, carrying it smoothly from A to B, making sure that she gives all the right signals and doesn't crash into an oncoming lorry. How will she keep it up, a journey of nine months, never exceeding the speed limit, no Little Chef to stop at on the way? Perhaps she'll get used to it in time ...

Term is over for the students. She sees them everywhere: carrying cases into cars, having tearful farewells in doorways, writing loving messages on each other's T-shirts. Get over it, Ruth wants to say. You'll see each other again in September. But she can remember what it's like to have the whole summer stretching ahead of you: working, travelling, lounging around annoying your parents. Four months is an eternity when you're eighteen. By the time the students come back, Ruth will be seven months pregnant. According to the printout in her bag, her baby is due on the first of November.

The students may be on holiday but Ruth isn't. She has dissertations to mark and lectures for next year to prepare. She climbs the stairs to her office and is touched to find two of her students loitering outside to say goodbye. Ruth teaches postgraduates who are usually on a one-year MA course so this really is the last time she will see them, especially as these two are from the States (she has a lot of overseas students; the university needs the money).

‘Goodbye ... good luck ... keep in touch ... come and see us if you're ever in Wisconsin ...’

Extracting herself, Ruth opens her door and begins collecting papers and books. Seeing her office with its *Indiana Jones* poster, its piles of books and examination scripts, gives her a genuine glow of pleasure. At least here she's Dr Ruth Galloway,

Archaeologist, not Ms Ruth Galloway expectant mother (*elderly* expectant mother, she'd been horrified to see on her notes). She is an academic, a professional, a person in her own right. She'll spend a few restful few days at home, reading about bones, decomposition and death.

'Ruth! How are you?' It is Phil.

Phil now knows about her pregnancy and is being supportive. He expresses this by talking in a hushed voice and asking her how she is at every opportunity.

'How was it?' He means the scan (she had to tell him as attending meant she missed the end-of-term lunch) but Ruth chooses to misunderstand.

'The post-mortem? OK. The new pathologist is a bit over-keen, jumps to conclusions too much—'

'I meant ... the *hospital*.'

'Oh, fine thanks.'

'No *problems*?'

'No.'

Phil stands in the doorway, smiling annoyingly. Ruth longs to get rid of him.

'Going away this summer?' asks Phil.

'No. You?'

'Well ...' Phil looks embarrassed. 'Sue and I might get away to our place in France for a few days.' Ruth wonders what Shona thinks about this. The latest from Shona is that Phil will leave his wife 'after the final examiners' meeting'. Why this fairly arbitrary date was chosen, Ruth has no idea; she only knows that Shona clings to it like the promise of the second coming. And if Phil does leave Sue, she thinks cynically, Shona's problems are only just beginning.

'Are you planning to drop in on the Swaffham site today?' asks Phil, changing the subject with alacrity. 'I hear they're coming up with some interesting stuff.'

'I might do.' In fact, she is planning to go straight home. Her back aches and she longs to lie down. But Phil is enthusiastic about Max's dig. The Romans are always worth a lottery grant or two, maybe even a TV appearance.

'Great. Could you pick up some soil samples?'

Damn, now she will have to make the detour into Swaffham and spend ages faffing about with sample bags. Why can't Phil do

it? Probably off to meet Shona.

‘OK,’ she says.

It is almost dark by the time she reaches the site. There are no cars parked on the churned-up earth at the bottom of the bank and Ruth is not sure if she feels pleased or disappointed. She hasn’t seen Max since the Imbolc night and wonders whether it will be awkward when she does. Did the kiss mean anything to him? Probably not, probably in Brighton they kiss each other at every opportunity. But she knows she has been thinking about it. Not all the time, she has too many other things on her plate, but certainly more than is comfortable. All in all, she is pleased to have the place to herself.

Getting a torch from her car, she climbs the slope to the site. Clearly the students have been working hard. Three new trenches have been dug and small piles of stones indicate that new buildings have been discovered. It looks as if there really was a small settlement here or, at the very least, a villa and surrounding buildings. Intrigued, Ruth moves closer.

She realises that she is in the very trench that Max first showed her but now it has been extended to expose a corner of a wall, plus what look like the remains of under-floor heating. This must mean that this was an important house. She also sees a corner of mosaic. She spares a thought for the people who settled here, on this exposed hillside, two thousand years ago. Were they Romano-British or Romans in exile? No wonder they had wanted heating, thinks Ruth, shivering in the evening air.

She is about to leave when, out of habit, she runs her torch along the foundation level of bricks, looking for anything strange or unusual. And then she sees it. Tiny reddish brown writing, less than an inch high. At first she can’t make it out, though the letters look very familiar. Then she realises that the words are written upside down. Craning her head round, she reads: ‘Ruth Galloway’.

Afterwards she is not sure quite why this spooked her so much. In a funny way it was the very size of the words, as if some tiny, evil creature has crept in amongst the stone and rubble and written her name. Why? She has only the most tenuous link to this site. Why would anyone go to the trouble of writing her name, upside down, in letters so small they can hardly be seen, on the wall of some obscure archaeological site? She doesn’t

know but she knows she isn't about to hang around and meet the poison dwarf in person. She stands up, heart hammering.

As she does so, she has the strongest sensation that someone is watching her. She swings round, the torch making a wide, panicked arc around her. 'Who's there?'

No answer but footsteps, definite footsteps, coming towards her, walking over the gravel in one of the trenches. Ruth scrambles out of her trench and shines her torch out into the darkness. Now she hears another noise. A slow, steady panting. Someone is breathing, very near her.

Ruth gives up all pretence at courage. Holding the torch out in front of her, she runs headlong down the hill. No longer the careful vehicle for her baby, she is now a terrified woman running for cover. The baby will just have to put up with it. She stumbles and almost falls. Oh God, where's her car? But then she sees the comforting lights of the Phoenix and knows she is heading in the right direction. Panting hard, she covers the rest of the distance at a canter. Her car is there. Her lovely trusty, rusty car. Then she stops; her blood freezing.

A dark shape is beside by her car. A man.

Ruth screams.

'Ruth? It's OK. It's me.' It is Max Grey.

Ruth hears someone still screaming and realises, to her embarrassment, that it is her. 'Max,' she gasps. He is by her side, putting an arm round her. He smells of wood-smoke and soap. 'Ruth? What is it?'

'Someone ... someone up at the site ... my name ... on a wall ...'

'What?'

Ruth takes a deep breath, holding on to Max's arm to steady herself. 'I was up at the site ... having a look. I saw someone had written ... written my name on a wall. Then I thought someone was there, watching me. I heard them breathing. Silly, I know.'

She can't see Max's face in the darkness but she feels his arm stiffen. His voice when it comes, though, is calm and reassuring. 'Why don't I go up and have a look? You stay here. Sit in your car, put the heater on. You're shivering. Hang on.'

He turns away and Ruth sees now that the Range Rover is parked beside her Renault. He comes back with a thick jumper and a flask. 'Here, put this on.' She puts on the jumper, it smells

comfortingly of musty wool. She opens her car door and climbs inside. Max hands the flask in after her. 'Have a swig. I'll be right back.'

Ruth takes a tentative sip. Black coffee. All drinks taste odd at the moment but this is something different. After a second, she realises it has whisky in it.

Max is back after a few minutes. He leans in through the window.

'Are you OK to drive home? I'll follow you.'

*

For the first time Ruth is relieved to see the security light come on as she opens her gate. Right now, she wants as much light as she can get. She opens the front door, hoping her sitting room is not too untidy.

Max Grey, though, does not seem to notice the papers all over the floor or even the dirty washing on the sofa. He strokes Flint, admires her books and her collection of arrowheads and accepts the offer of tea with every appearance of pleasure. It is only when they're sitting down with their tea (the washing hastily stowed away in the kitchen) that they talk about the events on the site.

'Was anyone there when you first arrived?' asks Max.

'No. It was completely deserted. Phil wanted me to get some soil samples, and I just thought I'd have a look at the trenches – you've done loads of work – and then I saw those ... those words.'

'You said you thought you heard someone ...'

'Yes, I heard noises very near me ... someone breathing. I don't know. I could have imagined it. Did you see anyone?'

Max is silent for a second and then he says, 'I saw a shape, maybe a dog or even a large fox. Nothing else.'

'A dog.' Ruth is so relieved that she laughs. 'That explains the panting then.'

'Yes.' But Max doesn't smile back. He frowns down into his cup.

'Have you any idea who could have done this?' asks Ruth. 'I mean none of your students knows me from Adam. And to go to the trouble of sneaking up to the site with a pot of red paint—'

Max looks up. 'I don't think it was paint.'

'What—' It takes a few seconds for Ruth to realise what he means and then a few more for her to be able to frame the word.

‘Blood?’

Max nods, ‘I think so, yes. We can check tomorrow.’

‘But why ...’ Ruth’s voice is rising, ‘why would anyone write my name on a wall *in blood*?’

‘I don’t know,’ Max says again. Then, ‘Ruth, have you ever read *I, Claudius*?’

Surprised Ruth says, ‘Yes, I think so. A long time ago. It’s by Robert Graves, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. You’re too young to remember but there was a terrific TV series years ago. Derek Jacobi and Siân Phillips.’

In fact Ruth does remember though she is flattered that Max thinks she is too young. The programme was past her bedtime but she remembers the opening credits: a snake gliding slowly over a Roman mosaic. Her parents used to say that it was disgusting (‘a waste of our licence fee. I’m going to write to Mary Whitehouse’) but Ruth had a strong suspicion that they used to watch it after she had gone to bed.

‘What about it?’ she asks.

Max sighs. ‘In the book, the child Caligula kills his father, Claudius’s brother Germanicus. He does it by, quite literally, scaring him to death.’

Ruth is silent, thinking of the snake moving across the floor. This whole thing has suddenly taken on a surreal tinge, as if she is acting in her own TV drama, quite unreal, the disturbing images existing only to shock the more sensitive viewers.

‘He did it,’ says Max, ‘by exploiting Germanicus’s superstitions. He stole his lucky talisman, a green jade figure of Hecate. He left animal corpses around the house, cocks’ feathers smeared in blood, unlucky signs and numbers written on the walls, sometimes high up, sometimes,’ he looks at Ruth, ‘sometimes very low down, as if a dwarf had written them. Then Germanicus’s name appeared on the wall, upside down. Each day, one of the letters disappeared. On the day that only a single G remained, Germanicus died.’

There is a silence. Flint jumps on the sofa, purring loudly. Ruth buries her hand in his soft amber fur.

‘Do you really think,’ she says at last, ‘that someone is trying to scare me, by using an idea they found in *I, Claudius*?’

Max shrugs. ‘I don’t know but it was the first thing that came to my head. And when you think about the dead cockerel ...’

‘So we’re looking for a deranged Robert Graves fan?’

Max laughs. ‘Or someone addicted to classic TV. I don’t know, Ruth. What does seem clear is that someone is trying to scare you.’

‘To warn me off the Norwich site?’

‘Possibly. It’s no secret that you’re involved. You had quite a high profile in that other case, didn’t you? The Lucy Downey case.’

Ruth is silent. She had tried to keep as low a profile as possible (only Nelson knew, for example, that it was she, not the police, who had found Lucy) but she supposes that things always leak out. In any case, it would not be hard to work out that she, as head of Forensic Archaeology, would be involved in both cases.

‘They’ll have to work harder than that to scare me,’ she says at last.

Max smiles. ‘Good for you.’ There is another silence, a rather different one this time. Then he says, almost shyly, ‘Ruth. Will you have dinner with me? One day next week. Not at the Phoenix. Somewhere nicer.’

Ruth looks at him, sitting at ease on her sagging armchair, his long legs folded under him. Beside her, Flint’s purrs increase. She shouldn’t say yes. She is a pregnant woman. She doesn’t need this sort of complication. Max smiles at her. She notices, for the first time, that one of his front teeth is slightly chipped.

‘All right,’ she says, ‘I’d like to.’

When he has gone, Ruth is so tired that she goes straight to bed without even checking that Flint has enough food for the night (he wakes her up later to remind her about this). Lying on her bed, she can still hear Max’s Range Rover driving slowly along the narrow road. Ten minutes later, her security light comes on again. But Ruth does not get up.

19th June

Festival for Minerva

I must get organised. I must not act ex abrupto. So – I have my knife which is honed now to a serviceable edge. I have the axe which will do later for the head. I have been wondering if I need some form of anaesthetic, to prevent the child from crying out. The difficulty is to obtain such things. The dentist might help, he is an intelligent man, at the cutting edge of science. I could easily explain my need for chloroform as a wish to carry out a scientific experiment at school.

She, as ever, is the problem. She never leaves the child alone. I must ask her – no, order her (I am the Master after all) – to leave the infant alone in the afternoons. Surely she has chores she should be doing about the place.

I have only a week or so in which to act. The trouble is that sometimes I am weak and the gods give me terrible dreams. I wake up sweating and crying – shameful. But I will not be distracted. I have begun to fast in order to purify the flesh. All must be in readiness.

CHAPTER 16

The DNA results show that the body under the doorstep is a girl. The post-mortem confirmed that the child is less than six years old. Father Hennessey, Nelson decides, has some explaining to do.

This time there is no cosy walk in the grounds. Nelson interviews the priest at the local police station. A car is sent to fetch him and when he arrives Nelson is sitting unsmiling behind a desk. Clough is also in the room and as Hennessey enters Nelson says into the tape machine, 'Interview commencing at fourteen hundred hours. Present: Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson and Detective Sergeant David Clough.'

Father Hennessey smiles politely and takes a seat opposite Nelson. He shows no surprise at his hostile reception nor does he make any attempt at small talk. He waits calmly for Nelson's first question.

'Father Hennessey,' he's damned if he's going to call him 'Father' again, 'you mentioned two children who went missing in 1973.'

They have looked them up, of course. Nelson was hoping to find Elizabeth Black's dental records to compare them to the skull but there is no record of Elizabeth ever visiting a dentist. And, after 1973, both children vanish completely.

'Yes,' says Father Hennessey, looking intently at Nelson.

'Could you tell us a bit more about their disappearance, please?'

Father Hennessey sighs. 'It was in the evening. The children had some free time before bed and most of them were playing in the grounds. Supervised, of course. Sister Immaculata called them in about six and there was no sign of Martin and Elizabeth. At first we thought they were just hiding. Martin had a ... mischievous sense of humour. But then, after we searched the house and the grounds, we began to get worried.'

He pauses and Nelson says, 'When did you call the police?'

'Almost immediately. They searched the house and grounds too. Some of the staff got quite upset. But nothing was found. Then they switched the search to the wider area.'

'Did you search? Personally?'

Father Hennessey's pale blue eyes look past Nelson. 'I searched all night,' he says at last. 'The house, the grounds. Then I rode around Norwich on my motorbike, looking in alleyways, abandoned houses, anywhere I thought they might hide.'

Clough interjects. 'You had a motorbike?'

'It's not against the law, you know,' replies Hennessey mildly.

'And in all this searching,' Nelson cuts in, 'did the police ever dig up the grounds?'

'No.'

Goons, thinks Nelson. They were probably too taken in by this saintly motorbiking priest. They would never assume that he could have killed the children. Well, Nelson is different.

'Did they look in the well?' he asks.

Now Father Hennessey looks surprised. 'No. It was boarded up, cemented over. No child could have fallen down it.'

Nelson says nothing, playing the silence game. This time he wins.

'Have you found something in the well?'

'We've found a child's skull,' Nelson tells him. 'A child of five. A girl.' 'Under six' is what the autopsy report says but he wants to shock Hennessey into saying something indiscreet.

Father Hennessey certainly looks shocked. His lips move silently, presumably in prayer. He asks, 'Is it Elizabeth?'

'We don't know for certain,' says Nelson, 'yet.' He sees no reason to add that they might never know as they have no DNA of Elizabeth's. But he wants Hennessey to think he will find out. Nelson, the fearless seeker after truth, scourge of wrongdoers.

'How could the skull have got in the well?' asks Hennessey, still sounding shaken. He takes a sip of water. Suddenly he looks an old man.

'You tell me.'

'I have no idea.' Sharper now. Hennessey is pulling himself together.

Silence again. Clough asks, 'Did you get on well with Martin and Elizabeth?' The change of subject, of tone. An old interrogation standby.

But Hennessey is equal to it. He looks directly at Clough. 'Yes. They were lovely children, very bright, very loving. They'd had a traumatic time, with their mother dying and were ... damaged.'

'Damaged?' says Nelson sharply. 'What do you mean?'

‘These things leave scars, Detective Chief Inspector. Martin was angry, angry with his mother for leaving him, angry with the world for letting it happen. Elizabeth was easier. She was very sad, very insecure. She clung to Martin, refused to be separated from her teddy, that sort of thing. But they were getting over it, slowly. Martin was exceptionally bright. I tried to encourage that. I gave him books to read.’

‘What sort of books?’

‘All sorts. He was interested in science and history. I gave him books about the Greeks and the Romans. He was fascinated by the idea that the house could have been built on a Roman site.’

Nelson remembers Ruth’s comments about Roman pottery found on the site. So the priest had known that, even then.

‘So you had a close relationship with the children?’

Again the priest meets his eyes squarely, almost defiantly. ‘Yes.’

‘And the other staff members?’

‘Everyone loved Elizabeth. She was a very lovable child. Martin was ... Martin was more difficult.’

‘We’ve spoken to Sister Immaculata —’

‘Have you?’ Hennessey leans forward eagerly. ‘How is she?’

‘In reasonable health,’ Nelson replies coldly, ‘mentally unimpaired,’ he adds.

Hennessey nods. ‘Good. She’s had a hard life, poor woman.’

Nelson ignores this. ‘She says that Martin was a troublemaker.’

‘As I say, he was angry.’

‘Did he have uncontrollable rages?’ asks Clough sympathetically.

For the first time, Father Hennessey looks angry. ‘No, he did not have “uncontrollable rages”.’ His voice puts irritable quotes around the words. ‘Nor did he kill his sister in a fit of demonic temper, as I imagine you’re implying. He loved her. They were exceptionally close.’

‘Unnaturally close?’

‘No, naturally close. They were a brother and sister with no one else in the world. Don’t you think they would be close?’

‘I assume nothing,’ says Nelson. ‘You knew them. I didn’t. I just want to find out who would kill a child and throw its head down a well. Now whoever did that, they were unnatural.’

Father Hennessey looks at him. ‘Unnatural maybe,’ he says in his quietest voice, ‘evil certainly.’

The drive home is silent apart from Clough chomping his way through two packets of Hula Hoops. Nelson is conscious that they haven't really got much further. Father Hennessey had seemed shocked at the discovery of the skull but he had also seemed genuinely surprised. Not surprised enough though to blurt out any confessions. Not that Nelson ever really thought he would; Father Hennessey is a cool customer. Controlled, hard almost, despite the surface warmth. Does this make him a murderer?

'Do you think he did it?' Nelson asks Clough as they speed through several picturesque villages ('Kill your speed, not a child!').

'The priest? Maybe. Easy enough to kill them, hide the bodies and bury them later. The cops didn't even dig up the grounds.'

'Bloody muppets.' Nelson grinds his teeth. 'Do you think there's anyone still around from those days?'

'Maybe Tom Henty. You know, the desk sergeant at Lynn. He's been around for donkeys' years.'

'Good idea. I'll talk to him.'

'Do *you* think Hennessey did it?' Clough looks curiously at his boss

'I think he's hiding something,' says Nelson slowly. 'Something to do with the children. Maybe he's covering up for someone.'

'What about that nun? Judy said she was a nutter.'

'No she didn't. She said she was as sharp as a needle.'

'Same thing. The nun could have killed them.'

'Why?'

'Maybe she abused the little girl and the boy found out.'

'Your mind's like a tabloid.'

'Thank you.'

'It's not a compliment. Pretty hard to dispose of the body of a twelve-year-old.'

'If they're not dead, where are they then?'

'That's the question. We'll widen the search. Try to find some relatives in Ireland. Talk to other people from the home. Nine times out of ten, missing people turn up right back where they started. It's almost as if they can't keep away.'

'Do you think they're alive?'

'The boy maybe. He was old enough to look after himself. The girl ... I think the girl might be our skeleton.'

'Well, it would be a bit of a coincidence if she isn't,' says

Clough, probing his empty Hula Hoops packet with a moistened finger, 'two dead children on one site.'

'Yes,' says Nelson thoughtfully. He is thinking about the site – it has held a children's home, a churchyard and maybe even a Roman villa. Who knows how many other incarnations it has had, how many deaths it has witnessed? He shakes himself mentally. What's the matter with him? He's starting to think like Cathbad.

'You know what was funny?' says Clough, finally abandoning his search in the packet. 'How much he talked about love.'

'Priests do that.'

'No. It was creepy. He said the girl was "lovable". I think that's a bit weird.'

Nelson considers. Was it weird? He had dismissed Hennessey's remarks ('Everyone loved Elizabeth') as standard priest-speak but what if Clough is right? Is something more sinister at work here? Is 'lovable' an odd word to use about a five-year-old girl? Does he mean, in fact, that he was in some perverted way in love with her?

'That's what the nun said. It was in Judy's report. She said Hennessey believed the boy needed "love and attention".'

Nelson is rather impressed that Clough has remembered this. But then again, it's a sad world if no one is allowed to love children.

'Maybe he did love them,' he suggests, 'in a non-sexual, fatherly way.'

'Jesus,' scoffs Clough, 'you're sounding like a right Godsquadder.'

'Rubbish,' says Nelson angrily, pulling out onto the motorway with the minimum of care. 'I'm just not jumping to conclusions. Never assume, that's what my first boss used to say.'

'I know. It makes an ass out of you and me.' Clough looks out of the window. Nelson wonders if he's getting a bit above himself. A good spell in the archives tomorrow will take him down a peg or two.

'Tomorrow,' he says coldly, 'you can start the search for the kids' family. And look up the Land Registry for the house. I want a list of everyone who's ever owned the site.'

'Jesus,' mutters Clough, in a distinctly non-religious tone.

CHAPTER 17

Max has suggested that they meet at Reedham which strikes Ruth as extremely inconvenient. Reedham is on the Broads, on the opposite side of Norwich. Getting there will involve a long and boring drive through the seven circles of hell, or the Norwich bypass. Why on earth couldn't they meet somewhere in King's Lynn, thinks Ruth crossly as she gets into her car. King's Lynn is not exactly short of restaurants. Maybe Max is a food freak who is going to take her to one of those experimental places that offer sausage-flavoured ice cream or deep-fried hedgehog. Well, if anyone gives her deep-fried hedgehog, she will be sick all over them and serve them right. She is beginning to wish that she had stayed in with *The Wire* and an M&S lasagne.

They are meeting by the Ship, a well-known Norfolk pub popular with river trippers. Surely she hasn't come all this way to have a pub meal surrounded by braying Londoners?

Max is sitting at a table overlooking the river. He jumps up when he sees Ruth and when she gets near enough kisses her awkwardly on the cheek. Is this a date then?

'Ruth! You look great.'

Ruth is wearing a smock top over cotton trousers. She hated this style when it first came in because it makes everyone look pregnant. Now, of course, this is an advantage.

'Are we eating here?' Ruth gestures at the pub, which certainly looks inviting in the evening light. The tables are starting to fill up and swans are venturing up from the river in search of snacks.

'Here? No. A bit further along.'

To Ruth's surprise he leads the way to his car.

'Where are we going?' she asks suspiciously.

'You'll see.'

They drive past houses set on the hill with smooth gardens stretching down to the river. Has Max got a house here? He must be earning more than most archaeologists if so. But Max drives past the residential area and along an unmadeup road. Ships' masts rise up in front of them.

He parks at the end of the road where there are several other cars as well as a low building marked 'Showers'. In front of them

is a small marina, crammed with shiny boats. Some of the owners are having a barbecue and there are children and dogs running around. It all looks very jolly but Max doesn't give the boat owners a second look. He strides along the pontoon, making it wobble alarmingly. Ruth follows more carefully. The last thing she wants is to fall in the water and to be pulled out by a drunken holidaymaker. They are at the end of the marina now and Max pauses by a small wooden gate. 'Not far now.'

Through the gate is another pontoon, far more rickety than those in the marina. As they walk along in single file, Ruth sees the river flowing swiftly past them, smooth as silk. Fields rise up on either side, the corn as tall as they are. It is getting dark and the birds are flying low over the reeds. Ahead of them the river divides into two, like an illustration in a storybook. Which path will you take?

'Here she is!' shouts Max suddenly.

Bemused, Ruth looks round for the 'she'. Maybe Max has brought her all the way here to meet his wife? Then she sees that Max is gesturing to a boat moored at the end of the pontoon. It is small and compact, blue and white with a striped awning.

'This is yours?'

'Welcome aboard the *Lady Annabelle*.'

'Is this where you're living?'

'Yes.' Max leaps lightly on board and holds out a hand to Ruth. 'It's great. I can moor at a different place every day but I keep her here mostly. Bit of a drive to Swaffham but it's worth it. It's just magical at night, sleeping out under the stars and listening to the river.'

On deck a small table has been laid for two, with candles and wine in a silver bucket. Ruth looks around her. Although they are still fairly near the marina, there is not a sound apart from the water slapping against the sides of the boat. Swallows swoop over the water and, on the opposite bank, she can see cows, knee deep in the wet grass.

Max is looking at her, rather anxiously. 'Is this OK? I thought it would be nicer than a restaurant. And I don't often have a chance to cook for anyone.'

'It's perfect,' says Ruth. Now that the initial surprise has worn off, she finds that she is relaxing for the first time that day, allowing the beauty of the evening to sweep over her. Max pours

them both a glass of white wine (Ruth doesn't like to refuse) and offers to show her round the boat. 'She's very small so it should only take a minute.'

'Is it ... she ... yours?'

'No, she belongs to a friend who lives near here. When he heard I was coming to Norfolk for the summer, he offered me the boat as my base. It's an ex-hire boat, a bathtub they call them round here. Very handy for getting through low bridges.'

The boat is very small but Ruth is fascinated by the evidence of Max's life on board. Below deck is a stove with something delicious-smelling simmering in a saucepan, and ropes of herbs and garlic hang from the ceiling. Opposite is a bench seat and a narrow table. At the pointed end (the prow?) there is a bed piled high with cushions. Ruth notices a dry-looking classical book on the bedside table and, more surprisingly, a stuffed toy on the pillow. Perhaps Max is not as assured and grown-up as he seems. Over the bed are windows which must open out onto the front of the boat. There is also a shower and a tiny loo which, to Ruth's embarrassment, she has to use.

They sit on deck drinking wine (in Ruth's case very slowly) and talking about Max's dig.

'I think it's going to be important. It's a significant site. Several buildings grouped around a temple. Could be a vicus.'

'Vicus?' Ruth feels she should know this word.

'A small settlement, usually near a military site. A garrison town, really.'

'Have you found any more skeletons?' asks Ruth.

'No. Some more pottery. A few coins. Some other metal pieces, possibly from a game. A signet ring with seal.'

'That reminds me.' Ruth tells him about the ring found on the Norwich site. Max is silent for a minute, pouring more wine.

'Sounds like Hecate. Were they human heads?'

'I think so.'

'Because sometimes Hecate is depicted with three animal faces; a snake, a horse and a boar.'

'They looked human to me.'

'Is there any other evidence of a Roman settlement on the site?'

'Not yet but we found some pottery. Samian ware.'

'Really?' Max looks genuinely interested.

'Why don't you come and have a look one day?'

‘I will.’ He disappears below to check on the food which, when it appears, is absolutely delicious – chicken in red wine, saffron rice, green salad.

‘You really can cook,’ says Ruth, smiling.

‘I like to cook but ... living on my own ...’ There is a small, charged silence.

‘Have you always lived on your own?’ asks Ruth, aware that it is a rather personal question.

But Max answers easily. ‘I lived with a girlfriend for a while but we split up, amicably enough. Now I think it would be hard to go back to living with someone. You get used to your own space. What about you?’

‘I lived with a boyfriend for a few years. When we split up I remember being quite relieved to have the house to myself. I guess I’m just not cut out for living with someone.’

‘Do you have a boyfriend now?’

‘No.’ Ruth knows that now is the time to tell Max that while she doesn’t have a boyfriend, she does have another, rather permanent, commitment. She hesitates, trying to find the words.

‘Ruth,’ Max reaches out to touch her hand.

‘I’m pregnant,’ Ruth blurts out.

‘What?’ Max sits back. It is dark now and Ruth can’t see the expression on his face. She takes a deep breath.

‘I’m pregnant. I’m not with the father. It’s complicated.’

‘Wow, Ruth ...’ Max seems completely at a loss. Ruth eats a last piece of chicken and instantly feels ashamed to be thinking about food in the middle of such an important declaration. It’s very good though.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ says Max at last.

‘It’s OK,’ says Ruth through chicken. ‘You don’t have to say anything. I just thought you ought to know, that’s all.’

‘When’s the baby due?’

‘November.’

‘I’ve got cheese for afterwards,’ Max says suddenly, ‘soft cheese. You’d better not have any. It’s not good when you’re pregnant is it?’

Ruth laughs, touched that he is thinking of her welfare, relieved to have got the announcement over with. ‘I’m full up anyhow.’

‘I’ve made chocolate brownies.’

‘Although I do have a space for chocolate brownies.’

Over the brownies, Max tells Ruth that one of the reasons he split up with his girlfriend was that he wanted children and she didn’t.

‘I never wanted children,’ Ruth says, ‘or I thought I didn’t. I was quite happy with my cats. But then, when I got pregnant, accidentally, I was surprised how delighted I felt. Suddenly I wanted this baby more than anything.’

‘It must feel amazing,’ Max laughs, rather embarrassed. ‘Sounds weird I know but I’ve always envied women for being able to get pregnant. Must be incredible to have all that going on inside you.’

‘Yes and you can eat without worrying about getting fat.’

‘Another brownie?’

‘Thanks.’

‘It’s scary though too,’ Ruth continues, after a pause. ‘I don’t know enough about babies or anything. I’m ... estranged from my mother. None of my friends have babies.’

This isn’t quite true. Some of Ruth’s friends from school and university have had babies, most of whom are children or even teenagers now. It’s just that, as soon as they had children, an invisible wall seemed to appear between them and their childless friends. Ruth could turn up at the hospital with flowers and balloons (‘It’s a girl!’), she could remember birthdays and Christmas, but she was forever outside that charmed circle of motherhood. Gradually, those friendships faded and died.

‘And the father ...?’

‘He doesn’t know.’

‘Oh.’ Ruth hears disapproval in the monosyllable. Of course, Max wants children. He would identify with the unknown father, will accuse her of abusing father’s rights and other newly invented crimes. In fact he’s probably about to jump on the roof dressed as Superman.

‘I will tell him,’ she says, ‘it’s just ... he’s married.’

‘Oh.’ A different sound, more understanding, perhaps even sympathetic. ‘You can talk to me,’ he says, ‘I don’t know anything about babies, but you can talk to me.’

‘Thank you.’

The silence, a companionable one this time, is broken by Ruth’s mobile ringing. She snatches it up, meaning to turn it off, but then she sees the caller display. ‘Debbie Lewis.’

‘Excuse me,’ she says, ‘I’d better take this call.’

Nelson is at home, reading through some of the results of Clough’s sulky trawl through the files. Nelson doesn’t usually bring work home (at the outset of their marriage he promised Michelle he wouldn’t and, by and large, he has kept his word). But he is keen to point the case in a new direction. If Clough has found any useful leads on the children ... but it seems that he hasn’t.

He has birth certificates for Martin and Elizabeth: mother Louise Black, née Maxwell; father Daniel Black. He has a death certificate for Louise Black dated 1970 and, in 1998, a death certificate for Daniel Black. If, as Nelson suspects, Daniel Black knew more about his children’s disappearance than he admitted, it is too late to talk to him.

He also has statements from other employees at the Sacred Heart Children’s Home – cleaners, gardeners, health visitors, someone calling themselves a Play Specialist. All these statements, without exception, attest to the saintliness of Father Hennessey and the high standard of care in the home. One of the gardeners describes Martin Black as ‘trouble’ but this could have been linked to his habit of digging holes in the lawn. The Health Visitor says Elizabeth was prone to colds and sore throats but was otherwise healthy; Martin was ‘as strong as a horse’.

Clough has also tracked down a distant cousin living in Ireland but, as she hasn’t seen Martin since 1963 and has never set eyes on Elizabeth, this contact is of little use.

Nelson also talked to Tom Henty, the grizzled Desk Sergeant, who remembered the Black case very well. ‘Massive manhunt, all leave cancelled. We couldn’t work out how two children could just vanish like that. I was a PC then and I was one of the first to go into the house. Great big place, it was. Like a stately home almost, high ceilings, chandeliers and all that but with kids’ stuff all over the place, toys and little tables and gym equipment in the dining room. Strange place.’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Nelson.

‘I don’t know. The priest in charge, he was a good bloke, you could see that, and the kids were happy but the house was strange. I searched the bedrooms, they were up in the attics, lots of little beds under the eaves and, I don’t know, something about it gave me the creeps. I kept expecting to see a dead body in one

of the beds.'

'But you didn't find anything.'

'No.' Seeing Nelson's look, Henty added, rather defensively, 'We did a proper search but there was nothing. We searched the grounds, had frogmen in the river, did a house-to-house, nothing.'

'Did you look in the well?'

Henty looked confused. 'It was boarded up. Hadn't been tampered with, you could see that.' He stared at Nelson with sudden fearfulness in his eyes. 'Is that what this is about? Have you found a body in the well?'

Now Nelson sits in his 'study' (also called 'the snug' by Michelle and 'the playroom' by Laura and Rebecca), reading through the print-outs and photocopies and wondering where the hell he's going to go from here. It can't be long before the press gets hold of the story and if he hasn't got a credible suspect by then he'll be hanged, drawn and quartered. A child's body buried under a former children's home – the tabloids will love it. And it's getting close to summer when other news will be thin on the ground. If he isn't careful, Inspector Plod of the Norfolk flatfoots will be on the front page of every paper for months.

He sighs. He can hear the *Sex and the City* music coming from the sitting room which means, at least, that he's not tempted to go in. His wife and daughters are addicted to the programme which is on every night on Sky. To him it seems sheer unadulterated filth combined with the most bizarre-looking women he has ever seen. 'It's fashion Dad,' Rebecca had explained. But, if it's fashion, how come he's never sees anyone else dressed like that? Maybe it's American fashion. Apart from a trip to Disneyland, which hardly counts, Nelson has never been to America and has no desire to go. Unlike some cops, he does not have a secret FBI fantasy which involves guns, fast cars and improbably glamorous settings. Life as a cop in America, he is sure, is much the same as anywhere – ten per cent excitement, ninety per cent mind-numbing boredom.

'Dad!' A shout from the sitting room. 'Your phone's ringing.' Grumbling Nelson goes into the hall, where his phone is ringing from his jacket pocket. Of course, it stops as soon as he lays hands on it. 'One missed call from Ruth.' Nelson presses call back.

'Ruth? What is it?'

She sounds very distant but he knows, from her voice, that she

has made some sort of breakthrough.

‘I’ve had a call from Debbie Lewis. She’s the forensic dentistry expert I mentioned.’

‘Bloody hell. That sounds a fun job.’

‘It’s fascinating. Anyway she’s come back with some interesting results. Apparently there are traces of stannous fluoride on the teeth.’

‘So?’

‘Well stannous fluoride was first introduced by Crest toothpaste as a trial in 1949. But they found that it stained the teeth so, in 1955, they switched to sodium monofluorophosphate.’

‘So what?’ Nelson’s head is starting to swim.

‘So the skull must be from a child who was alive before 1955. When was the girl born? The girl in the children’s home?’

‘Elizabeth Black?’ Nelson rifles through the papers on his desk but he thinks he already knows the answer.

‘1968,’ he says.

CHAPTER 18

Nelson calls a special team meeting in the morning. Working on Saturday means overtime, which won't please Whitcliffe, but he knows it is imperative that they make some headway on the case before the press get hold of it. Nelson arrives at the station in a mood of manic efficiency. He bounds upstairs, crashes open the door to the incident room, rips the picture of Father Patrick Hennessey off the pinboard and barks, 'Right, the priest's in the clear. Any other ideas?'

The effect is rather ruined because Judy and Clough are the only people in the incident room. Clough is eating a McDonald's breakfast burger and Judy is reading the *Mail*.

'What did you say?' asks Clough, screwing up greaseproof paper and throwing it in the bin.

'The priest.' Nelson puts the picture on the table. Father Hennessey's blue eyes stare blandly up at him. 'He's innocent. Ruth Galloway has identified traces of fluoride on the skull that could only have come from before 1955. Elizabeth Black was born in 1968.'

'Fluoride?' Clough still looks blank.

'In the teeth. Apparently there's some special sort of fluoride that was only used between 1949 and 1955. So that's our range.'

'Don't they put fluoride in the water anyway?' asks Clough.

'Not in Norfolk,' offers Judy, folding away the paper. 'Fluoride occurs naturally in our water. There's no need to add it to the supply.'

'Anyway, this is different stuff. Stannous fluoride, it's called. Apparently they don't use it any more because it stains your teeth. Or rather they do but only in one specialised brand.'

'So Holy Joe didn't do it?' Clough sounds disappointed.

'No.'

'I never thought he did,' says Judy.

'Well, you're another one of them.'

'What?'

'Catholics.'

'They're everywhere, Cloughie,' says Nelson, 'except in the Masons. Now, come on, we've got work to do.'

Ruth also wakes in an optimistic frame of mind. It is Saturday so she can have a lie-in. Light filters in through the curtains and onto the bed where Flint sleeps stretched out, his claws twitching. Ruth stretches too, touching the cat with her toes. It had been a good night last night. The meal on the boat, getting the pregnancy thing off her chest, the breakthrough in the case. The perfect evening in fact. After the call from Debbie and Ruth's call to Nelson, she and Max had chatted some more and then he had driven her back to her car. Drinkers were still sitting outside the pub and the moon was high above the treetops. He had kissed her cheek and told her to take care. 'See you soon,' Ruth had said. 'I hope so,' Max had replied.

There was something in his tone, and in the kiss, which makes Ruth's heart beat a little faster as she remembers it. He can't possibly fancy her, especially now he knows she is pregnant but, nevertheless, there is something, a hint that they might be more than just friends. Does she fancy him? A little, she admits. He is very much her type, tall and dark and intelligent, a little distant. But all those usual women's magaziney feelings have been submerged by the overwhelming fact that she is expecting a baby. She can't really think of anything else. Even now, lying here luxuriating in the warm bed, she is thinking about the creature inside her. She even fantasises that she can feel him move, although the nurse at the hospital said it was too early. There is something though. A heaviness, a presence, a sense of space filled. She has even thought of a name for him. She has begun to call him Toby. She doesn't know why, she doesn't even particularly like the name, but she just has a feeling that this baby is called Toby.

Damn, she needs to go to the loo again. She might as well make a cup of tea now she's up. Downstairs, the early morning view over the Saltmarsh is spectacular, seagulls wheeling against the pale blue sky. The news is on the radio but soon there will be that blissful listening hour between nine and ten: feel-good stories, inheritance tracks, bizarre facts about people who collect matchboxes or who have unknowingly married close blood relations. Perfection.

Ruth pads upstairs with her tea. She'll listen to the radio and then she'll think about getting up. She might even go for a swim, do something healthy. It'll be good for Toby. Humming

tunelessly, she gets back into bed.

Nelson faces his team across the now more crowded incident room. 'So,' he is saying forcefully, 'whilst the evidence needs to be verified, it does seem that we are looking at an earlier timescale for this crime. Elizabeth Black was born in 1968. If the expert evidence is correct, the skull can't possibly be hers.'

'Are we sure the skull and body are the same child, sir?' Nelson cranes his head to see who has asked this excellent question. A new recruit, Tanya Fuller.

'Good question, Tanya. Yes, the DNA results confirm this. So, we're looking at earlier events in the house. Cloughie, what does the title deed registration tell us?'

Clough, who has been glaring resentfully at Tanya, jumps to his feet. He flicks importantly through his file.

'Prior to 1960, the house was owned by ... Bloody hell!' After breakfast, Ruth contemplates her day. There is always work, of course, but the sun is shining in the dust motes by her window and she doesn't feel like working. Exercise would be good but she no longer fancies the swimming pool with its smell of chlorine and other peoples' feet. A walk, that's what she'd like. A brisk walk with a pub lunch at the end of it.

She almost phones Shona, who is sometimes amenable to walking if compensated by alcohol, but then she hesitates, wondering if she's up to further bulletins on the state of Phil's marriage. Anyway, Shona would want to eat in King's Lynn, somewhere where she can be sure of extra virgin olive oil and ciabatta. Ruth fancies something a little more rustic. Suddenly, a vision of the Phoenix comes into her head – the smell of chicken cooking on the outdoor grill, the view over the hills, the clink of glasses and the hum of conversation.

Didn't Max say something about discovering some more finds on the site? If Ruth drives out to Swaffham, she won't be going to see Max, she'll be going to see the pottery and the coins and the pieces from the Roman board game. That's all right then.

Ruth fetches her jacket.

'Prior to 1960,' Clough looks portentously around the room, 'the house was owned by Christopher Spens.'

'Christopher ...' Nelson echoes, 'not the same family ...?'

'One and the same.' Clough sounds like he is enjoying himself though, in retrospect, this is an oversight of fairly epic

proportions. 'Father of Roderick Spens, grandfather of Edward Spens.'

'Explains why he still owns the site really,' says Tanya brightly. Clough scowls at her.

'Did the Spens family actually live in the house?' asks Judy.

'Looks like it – I've got the census here. Yep, census of 1951. Christopher Spens, Rosemary Spens, children Roderick and Annabelle.'

'Right.' Nelson gets to his feet. 'Cloughie, you find out all you can about the Spens family. Judy and Tanya, you get on to the lab for the test results. I'm going to have a little chat with Edward Spens.'

*

The weather stays bright all the way to Swaffham but as Ruth pulls off the A47 (carefully mirror-signal-manoeuving) dark clouds are scudding across the sky. As she parks on the grass at the foot of the hill, fat raindrops are beginning to fall. She watches as the students run laughing down the slope, holding coats and tarpaulins over their heads. Most disappear into the pub, some bundle into dilapidated cars and drive off in a blur of exhaust smoke. Soon Ruth's is the only vehicle parked at the bottom of the mound.

*

'Is it important, Harry? Otherwise one does rather like leave weekends free for the family.'

'Oh it's important, Mr Spens,' says Nelson grimly. He decides to do away with any introductory niceties. 'Why didn't you tell me that your family used to live on Woolmarket Street?'

A slight pause. 'I assumed you knew.'

'Never assume, Mr Spens. So, even when a body was discovered on the site, you didn't think it was worth mentioning that the house was once your family home?'

'I never lived there. The house and land was leased to the diocese in 1960.'

'But you still owned it?'

'Yes. But you were interested in the years when it was a children's home. The Spens family had nothing to do with the

house then.'

'And now we're interested in the Spens years,' says Nelson smoothly.

'What do you mean?'

'We've got evidence that the body was that of a child born in the early to mid-fifties. When would be a good time for me to pop over?'

The rain seems to be slowing down. Ruth, who feels slightly sick after the car journey, decides to take a short walk after all. Just up to the site and back. She gets out of the car, pulling on her yellow sou'wester.

The climb up the hill is hard going and she finds herself staring down at the grass, willing her feet to keep moving. When she gets to the top and looks around her, she realises that the sky is now completely black. Far off, she hears the first faint rumble of thunder.

As she heads towards the main trench she thinks she sees something out of the corner of her eye. She whirls round but there is nothing, just the wind blowing across the coarse grass. But Ruth is sure she saw something – a black shape skirting around the edge of the site. An animal maybe but, for some reason, Ruth feels shaken. She hears Max's voice. *She is meant to haunt crossroads, crossing places, accompanied by her ghost dogs.*

Don't be ridiculous, she tells herself. Hecate's hounds are hardly going to be lying in wait for you. It was probably a fox or a cat. But, nevertheless, she has a strong urge to go back to her car and drive as far away from the site as she can. It is only the thought of climbing all the way up the hill for nothing that stops her. She'll just have a quick look in the main trench and go back. Just to say that she's done something.

The sky murmurs again. Pulling her hood further over her head, Ruth lowers herself into the trench.

Ruth stumbles slightly and almost falls onto the packed earth. Suddenly lightning splits open the sky. Ruth shuts her eyes. When she opens them again, there is a dead baby at her feet.

20th June

Festival for Summanus

Last night I had a terrible dream – a snake-faced woman, a man with two faces, a child thrown into the furnace, its flesh melting off, like a plastic doll that has fallen in the fire. I woke drenched in sweat but I was too scared to go back to sleep. I stayed awake, reading Pliny and waiting for dawn to break. Why am I troubled in this way? I have made all the right sacrifices yet it is almost as if the gods are angry.

The weather has got warmer. Yesterday Susan was working in the garden with her sleeves rolled up. I could see her arms, speckled like hens' eggs, covered with surprisingly thick blonde hairs. I had to reprimand her, of course. I am the Master.

I am tired. Sometimes I just want to lie down and sleep and forget everything. By a sleep to say we end the heartache ... Hamlet Act 3, scene 1. To die, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream.

Ay, there's the rub.

CHAPTER 19

Ruth is floating in a dark sea. Toby is somewhere near but she can't see or touch him. It's funny, but suddenly she feels she knows him inside out, his hopes and fears, his loves and hates, as if he were an old friend, not a three-month-old foetus. She even knows what his voice sounds like. It sounds like he's saying goodbye.

She is on the beach and a tide of bones is washing up against the shore. She hears Erik's voice. He is talking to Toby, 'It's the cycle of life. You're born, you live and then you die. Flesh to wood to stone.' 'But he's not even born yet,' she wants to scream but somehow her head is underwater and she can't speak or hear or breathe.

The tide brings her back again but now she's in the trench and it's too dark to see. She knows there's someone there with her. Someone evil. She sees a woman with two black dogs, a crossroads, the yellow eyes of an owl.

Now it is Max's voice she hears in her head. 'She was the goddess of many things. The Greeks called her the "Queen of the Night" because she could see into the underworld ... She's the goddess of the crossroads, the three ways ... Another name is Hekate Kourotrophos, Hecate the child-nurse.'

'Hecate!' she says, forcing the breath out of her lungs, 'save me!'

Then another wave washes over her and everything is black. Nelson is on his way to interview Edward Spens when he gets the call. He listens intently and then performs a screeching U-turn in the middle of the dual carriageway. Then he switches on the siren.

She is in the sea again and the tide is pulling her backwards and forwards, dragging her body against the stones, engulfing her in darkness. Now and again she sees lights, very far away, darting to and fro in the black water. She hears voices too, sometimes louder, sometimes softer. She hears her mother, Phil, Shona, Irish Ted and the nurse at the hospital. *Are you on your own?*

Once she hears Nelson's voice, very loudly. 'Wake up, Ruth!' he is saying. But *he* has to wake up, he has to leave, get back home

before his wife finds out. They can never be together again.

Thanks. What for? Being there.

Two children are digging a well on the beach. They are singing, 'Ding Dong Dell, Pussy's in the well.' Flint appears, very large, licking his whiskers. Then Sparky wearing a necklace of blood. A headless bird singing in a cage. The light glinting on coins thrown into a wishing well. A penny for your thoughts. *Ding Dong Dell, Pussy's in the well.*

Erik is rowing her to shore. He is talking about a Viking funeral. 'The ship, its sails full in the evening light. The dead man, his sword at his side and his shield on his breast.' The tide rocks the boat up and down. 'Do not be afraid,' Erik tells her, 'it is not your time.' Time and tide wait for no man. The sea carries her back through her life – Eltham, school, University College, Southampton, Norfolk, the Saltmarsh, the child's body buried in the henge circle. Cathbad, torch upraised. *Goddess Brigid, accept our offering.*

Another wave takes her right out of the water and leaves her stranded in daylight, gasping and shaking. She opens her eyes and sees Max, Nelson and Cathbad looking down at her.

She closes her eyes again.

Nelson drives like a maniac towards the hospital. 'Ruth's hurt,' Cathbad had said. 'I think she might be losing the baby.'

The baby. He does not stop to wonder how Cathbad knows or what Cathbad knows. He does not even wonder why Cathbad is the one who is ringing him, why he is with Ruth at all. All he can think about is that Ruth's pregnancy, which was hitherto only a suspicion, has become reality. And that the baby she is losing may be his. He presses his foot harder on the accelerator.

At the hospital he finds not only Cathbad, complete with cloak, but the know-all from Sussex University, Max Whatshisname. They are standing in the waiting area, by the rows of nailed-down chairs and ancient copies of *Hello!*, looking helpless.

'What's going on?' barks Nelson, going straight into policeman mode.

'They're examining her now,' says Cathbad, putting a calming hand on Nelson's arm. He shakes it off irritably.

'Let me speak to the doctor.'

'In a second. The doctor's busy with Ruth now.'

Thwarted, Nelson turns on Max who is looking awkward and

embarrassed.

‘What happened?’

‘I found her at the site.’ If Nelson sounds like a policeman, Max sounds like a suspect. ‘I went to check on the dig after the rain and she was there, in a trench, unconscious.’

‘Was anyone else there?’

‘Not at first but while I was ... looking at her ... Cathbad appeared.’

‘Just appeared?’ growls Nelson, looking at Cathbad. ‘Got magic powers now, have you?’

Cathbad looks modest. ‘I just happened to be at the site. I wanted to have a look round. As you know, I’m interested in archaeology.’

‘And you just happened to be there when Ruth collapsed?’

‘I must have arrived a few minutes after Max. I saw his car at the foot of the hill.’

‘And what happened to Ruth? How come she collapsed?’

In reply, Cathbad holds something out. Nelson recoils.

‘What the hell’s that?’

It is Max who answers. ‘It’s a model of a newborn baby. When I saw it, I thought ...’

‘So did I,’ says Cathbad, sounding rather shamefaced. ‘That’s why I sent you the message.’

Nelson looks at the model. It is an anatomically perfect plastic replica of a full-term foetus. Its face is blank, its eyes sightless. Turning it over, he sees a name stamped at the base of the spine. ‘It’s from the museum,’ he says. ‘I went to some ridiculous party there and I remember it. They’ve got these models of foetuses at all stages of development.’

Max looks as if he is about to speak but at that moment the doctor (a disconcertingly youthful Chinese woman) appears in front of them.

‘Are you with Miss Galloway?’

‘Yes,’ answers Nelson immediately.

‘How is she?’ asks Cathbad.

‘Still unconscious but her vital signs are good. She should come round soon. I understand she’s pregnant?’

‘About sixteen weeks,’ says Cathbad, ‘I told the ambulance crew.’

The doctor nods soothingly. ‘There’s no sign of a miscarriage

but we'll do a scan later. Go in and talk to her. It might help her come round.'

The invitation seems to be addressed to Cathbad alone but all three men follow the doctor into a side ward, where Ruth is lying in a curtained cubicle. Her name is already at the end of her bed. This efficiency strikes Nelson as ominous. Aren't people meant to wait for ages in Casualty, lying on a stretcher in the corridor?

Ruth is lying on her side with one arm flung over her head. She seems to be muttering under her breath. Cathbad sits beside her and takes her hand in his. Nelson stands awkwardly behind him. Max hovers by the curtain, seemingly uncertain about whether he should stay or go.

'What's she saying?' asks Nelson.

'Sounds like Tony,' says Cathbad.

'Toby?' suggests Max from the background.

Suddenly Nelson steps forward. 'Wake up, Ruth!' Ruth's eyes flicker under her lashes.

'Don't shout at her,' says Max. 'That's not going to help.'

Nelson turns on him furiously. 'What's it got to do with you?'

But Cathbad is looking at Ruth.

'She has come back to us,' he says.

'What's happened?' Ruth's voice is faint, but accusatory, as if somehow this is all their fault.

'You fainted,' says Cathbad. His voice is soothing. 'You'll be fine.'

Ruth looks, rather desperately, from one face to another. 'The baby?' she whispers.

'Fine,' says Cathbad bracingly. 'They'll do a scan but there's no sign that anything's wrong.'

'The baby in the trench?'

'It was a model,' says Nelson, 'some nutter must have put it there for a joke.'

He holds out the plastic baby. Ruth turns her head away and tears slide down her cheeks.

'Your baby's OK,' says Nelson in a softer voice. Ruth looks up at him and somehow it seems as if they can't look away. The seconds turn into minutes. Max fiddles with a hand sanitiser on the wall. Cathbad, of course, is incapable of embarrassment.

'I think,' he says brightly, 'that we should all give thanks to the goddess Brigid for Ruth's safe recovery.'

Luckily, at that minute a nurse pushes aside the curtains and says that they are transferring Ruth to another ward. They will keep her in for the night, she says, just for observation. 'And in the morning,' she says cheerfully, 'one of your friends can drive you home.' She looks at the three men, from Cathbad's purple cloak to Max's mud-stained jeans and Nelson's police jacket, and her smile fades slightly.

In the morning, Ruth is only too keen to leave hospital. At first it had been wonderful to lie between the cool, starched sheets and have kind nurses bring her tea and toast. They had wheeled her down for the scan and there was Toby, floating happily in his clouds. To Ruth's embarrassment she had cried slightly, sniffing into the pink tissues handed to her by a nurse. Jesus, they're so *nice* in here. It's a wonder they don't go mad.

But as the night drew on she had started to worry about Flint (Cathbad had offered to feed him but who knows whether he'd remember), about her baby (how on earth is she going to cope on her own?) and, finally, about herself. It seems that someone is trying to scare her to death. Her name written in blood (Max has confirmed this) and now the final gruesome discovery of the plastic baby. Did whoever put it there know she is pregnant or was it just another grisly classical allusion? And who could it be? It must be someone close enough to put the objects in place the split second these sites are deserted. And why? This is the question that chased itself around in her head all through the long night, full of nurses padding to and fro and white figures hobbling to the loo and back. The woman next to her snored continually, but unevenly, so Ruth was unable even to fit the noise into a soothing background rhythm. She had nothing to read and eventually this need became so pressing that she asked the nurse for something, anything, with words on. The nurse came back with *Hello!* magazine so Ruth spent the rest of the night reading about footballers' weddings and obscure Spanish royalty to the accompaniment of jagged grunts from the bed next door.

Morning starts early with a tepid cup of tea at seven and Ruth is already asking when she can go. She must let the doctor see her first, say the nurses soothingly. By eight she is sitting, fully dressed, on the bed. She had not thought to ask any of her visitors yesterday to bring her a change of clothes and, in any

case, she would have been too embarrassed. But there is something sordid about putting the same clothes back on. She hasn't even got a toothbrush but a nurse brings her toothpaste and she rubs it vigorously round her mouth. The woman next door (very pleasant when she isn't snoring) offers her deodorant and some rather violent-smelling body spray. Ruth sits on the bed, smelling of roses, rereading an account of how some actress she has never heard of overcame tragedy to marry some sportsman she has never heard of. It's all very inspiring.

Eventually a teenage boy masquerading as a doctor appears, examines her head and tells her she can go home. 'Come back at once if you have any dizziness or blackouts,' he says sternly. He's wearing baseball boots. Baseball boots! How can Ruth possibly take anything he says seriously?

She has nothing to pack so she asks the nurse if she can call a taxi. 'No need,' says the nurse, smiling sweetly (though, to Ruth's knowledge, she has been on duty for the last twelve hours). 'A friend of yours rang and said he'd come to collect you. Wasn't that nice of him?'

The nurse doesn't say which friend but as she emerges from the main doors Ruth is not really surprised to see Nelson's Mercedes parked in the space reserved for minicabs. She gets into the front seat and for a few minutes they sit in silence.

'Why didn't you tell me?' asks Nelson at last.

'I was going to.'

'Oh, that's all right then.'

'It was difficult,' retorts Ruth, 'you're married. I didn't want to rock the boat.'

'Didn't you think I had a right to know? If it is mine, that is.'

'Of course it's yours,' flares Ruth, 'whose did you think it was?'

'I thought maybe your ex-boyfriend ... Peter.'

'I haven't slept with him for ten years.'

'It's not his then,' says Nelson with a slight smile.

'No, it's definitely yours.' There is another silence broken only by the minicabs behind starting a strident chorus of hooting. Nelson swears and puts the car in gear. They drive in silence through the Norwich backstreets. It's Sunday morning and everything is quiet, people are emerging from newsagents with giant Sunday papers under their arms and café owners are putting tables out on the pavements. As they pass through the centre of

the city, they can hear church bells ringing.

‘What are you going to do?’ asks Nelson, breaking sharply at a zebra crossing.

‘Have the baby,’ says Ruth determinedly, ‘bring it up on my own.’

‘I want to help.’

‘Help? What do you mean “help”?’

‘You know ... financially. And other things. I want to be involved.’

‘How involved? Are you going to tell Michelle?’

Nelson says nothing but Ruth sees his eyes narrow. Eventually, he says, ‘Look, Ruth. This isn’t easy. I’m married. I don’t want to break up my family. The girls—’

‘Don’t think for one second that I want to marry you. That’s the last thing I want.’

She thinks Nelson relaxes slightly and when he speaks again his tone is gentler. ‘What do you want from me then?’

‘I don’t know.’ She doesn’t. Of course, on one level she does want a totally committed partner who will come with her to the birth and bring up the baby with her. But that isn’t on offer. ‘I just want someone to talk to, I suppose,’ she says.

‘Well, you can talk to me. Have you had a scan yet?’

‘Yes, he’s got long legs apparently.’

‘He?’

‘I think it’s a boy. I’m calling him Toby.’

‘Toby!’ The car swerves. ‘Toby! You can’t call him Toby.’

‘Why not?’

Nelson hesitates. Ruth waits for him to say ‘because it’s a poof’s name’ but supposes that, even for Nelson, this is a step too far.

‘I suppose you think I should call him Harry,’ says Ruth.

‘Harry? No. Ever since Harry bloody Potter that’s been a nightmare. But couldn’t you name him after ... What’s your dad’s name?’

‘Ernest.’

‘Well, maybe not.’

‘I could ask Cathbad.’

‘Jesus. He’ll want to call him Jupiter Moon Grumbleweed or something. Why not just give the poor kid a normal name. Like Tom.’

‘Or Dick. Or Harry.’

She and Nelson are never together very long without arguing, reflects Ruth. But all the same she is happy, almost exhilarated. Talking about the baby, discussing names, has made her pregnancy seem more real than at any time since the first scan. No, it's not the pregnancy that seems real, it's the baby. Or rather, it's the idea that the baby will grow up to be a child, a *person*, someone who will eat Marmite sandwiches, make finger paintings, play football, jump in puddles. She realises that she is grinning.

They are on the ring road now. Nelson is driving too fast as usual. Ruth sometimes thinks he only became a policeman to avoid speeding fines.

But it seems that he also has been thinking. 'It's odd, isn't it,' he says, overtaking a lorry, 'we don't know each other that well, but we're having a baby together.'

'We're not "having a baby together",' says Ruth.

'Yes we are,'

'But we're not "together". You're not going to come to parent-teacher evenings, are you?'

'That's a bit of a way off, Ruth.'

'I just mean, I'm having the baby on my own but you're the father. That's all.'

'Thanks.'

'You should be pleased I'm not making all sorts of demands.'

'You should be pleased I'm not running for the hills.'

The ridiculousness of this exchange makes them both laugh.

'What about your parents?' asks Nelson. 'Are they supportive?' He says this as if he is proud to have thought of such a PC term.

'Not exactly,' says Ruth, 'they're Born Again Christians. They think I'm going to burn in hell.'

'Nice. They might come round when the baby's born though.'

'They might, I suppose.'

'Have you got brothers or sisters?'

Nelson is right, thinks Ruth, it is odd that they can be having a baby together when they know nothing about each other's lives. She has no idea if Nelson has brothers or sisters either.

'I've got a brother. He's OK but we're not close. He lives in London.'

'Has he got children?'

'Yes. Two.'

Toby will have cousins. That has never occurred to her before either.

‘Are you going to carry on working?’ asks Nelson.

‘Of course. I’ve got to support the baby, haven’t I?’

‘I told you, I want to help.’

‘I know, but realistically, if you don’t tell Michelle, you’re not going to be able to do very much. That’s OK though. I don’t want help. You can buy him a bicycle or something.’

‘His first football.’

‘You’re not going to insist he supports some ridiculous northern team are you?’

‘Blackpool. Of course.’

‘What if I want him to support ...’ She wracks her brain for the most annoying choice. ‘Arsenal?’

‘Then I’ll apply for custody.’ After a short silence, Nelson says, ‘What will you tell about me? I don’t want him growing up not knowing who his father is.’

‘I don’t know,’ says Ruth. ‘I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.’ But the bridge looks more like a rickety plank across the Niagara Falls. If Michelle doesn’t know, how can she possibly tell her baby that Nelson is his father?

They are on the Saltmarsh road now. The tide is in, forming sparkling blue pools between the islands of long grass. Ruth opens her window and breathes in the salty sea smell.

Nelson watches her. ‘You love this place, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then there’s no point in me saying it’s an isolated spot to bring up a baby?’

‘No.’

Nelson parks outside Ruth’s cottage. ‘Do you want to come in?’ she asks.

He looks awkward. ‘I ought to get back. I said I’d take Michelle to the garden centre.’

‘Oh, all right.’

Ruth gets out and scrabbles in her bag for her key. Nelson watches her from the car. For some reason, the sight of her standing there on her doorstep in her crumpled shirt, a bandage over her left eye, makes his throat constrict.

‘Ruth!’ he calls.

She turns.

‘Take care.’

She waves and smiles and then, finding her key, disappears into the house.

24th June

Fors Fortuna

It's very hot. Too hot. Last night I slept with only a sheet over me and I was covered in sweat by the morning. She came to me again and I was weak. Perhaps my weakness is why this house is cursed, why nothing grows here but dust and ashes. In the morning I sacrificed again and the entrails were rotten, stinking and putrid. I buried them behind the greenhouse where the grass grows long. The time is near. We cannot escape.

CHAPTER 20

Edward Spens lives in Newmarket Road, a busy thoroughfare on the outskirts of Norwich. This is the land of the seriously rich. The houses are huge, set back from the road and surrounded by trees. So many trees, in fact, that the houses themselves are almost hidden until you come to the end of the driveway and they suddenly appear in all their smug, landscaped glory. Nelson drives slowly up to Edward Spens' house, past a covered swimming pool and a child's play house that looks as if it must have needed planning permission. Sprinklers play on the perfectly manicured lawn, and as he comes to a halt a gardener hurries past carrying emergency plant supplies. Nelson is pleased to see that his dirty Mercedes distinctly lowers the tone.

He is still feeling shell shocked after yesterday's revelation. Well, not exactly revelation, more confirmation. How unlucky can a man be? He has a one-night stand and, hey presto, he's going to be a father again. Other men (he knows this from Cloughie) sleep around all the time with never a whisper of consequences. Why the hell hadn't he used contraception? Why hadn't Ruth? His feelings towards Ruth veer crazily between anger, admiration and a sort of heart-clenching compassion. He admires her for her determination to have the baby and is grateful that she doesn't seem to want anything from him. But he is slightly irritated too. Ruth seems to think that she can just have this baby and bring it up on her own, with the occasional birthday present from him. But he knows, as she doesn't, that parenthood can be a lonely business. He knows that Michelle struggled sometimes, especially when they moved down south, when he was working long hours and she was alone all day with the kids. Ruth will have no one to turn to, except her Jesus-freak parents and that flaky girlfriend of hers. Maybe Cathbad will offer to babysit. That's no life for a son of his.

His son. Contrary to popular belief, Nelson has never been desperate for a son. He has always been delighted with his daughters. He likes their otherness, their ability to disappear behind secret feminine rites, he even likes being outnumbered at home; it's restful somehow ('It's a girl thing, Dad. You wouldn't

understand'). A son – now a son brings all sorts of buried emotions to the surface. Nelson was never that close to his father. He was the only boy in the family (he has two older sisters, a pattern that he now sees is going to be repeated) and he realised, early on, that there were expectations attached to the role. Unlike his sisters he wasn't expected to be good; he was expected to be tough, athletic, embarrassed about emotions, passionate about football. And, by and large, Nelson achieved this. He suppressed an early interest in ponies (which had deeply worried his father) and became a football fanatic, playing for the school, and later the county teams. His father had always been there to watch him, yelling incomprehensible advice from the touch-line despite the fact that he, Nelson's father, had never actually played the game. He had a withered foot, the result of childhood polio, and walked with a stick. How had this affliction affected his vision of manliness? Was this the reason why he wanted his son to be a sportsman above everything? Nelson never asked him and now it is impossible. His father died when he was fifteen. Archie Nelson never saw his son become a policeman, a career choice which would have delighted him.

Nelson's mother, Maureen, was a much bigger influence. She is a forceful Irishwoman who shouted at her children and sometimes even clouted them. Archie never raised his hand or his voice (except on the touchline). Yet, despite this, Nelson was closer to his mother. They had some epic rows during his teenage years but he also knew that, deep down, Maureen loved him fiercely. Perhaps that's why, even now, he actually prefers the company of women. Oh, he can do the lad stuff all right, he wouldn't be able to survive in the force otherwise. He still plays football and golf, likes a night in the pub, enjoys the camaraderie of police work. But he also likes the company of strong, intelligent women. Which is why he was drawn to Ruth Galloway, which is why he is in this mess today.

Nelson sighs as he parks his car outside the Spens mansion. Having spent Sunday being the perfect husband, he now feels emotionally exhausted. He not only took Michelle to the garden centre but out for a pub lunch afterwards. He has even agreed to go to see some God-awful play with her tonight. Now it's a relief to be able to turn back to business. And Edward Spens won't be able to hide behind his perfect house and double

garage. Nelson wants some answers. Why didn't Spens mention from the beginning that his family used to own the house on Woolmarket Street? And is there a dead child that he also forgot to mention? Not in Edward Spens' lifetime perhaps but, sometime during the years that the Spens family lived in the house, a child was killed and buried under the wall, its head thrown into the disused well. That's quite some family secret.

Edward Spens greets Nelson as if he is a long-lost friend. 'Harry! Nice to see you. Come in.' Nelson silently curses Whitcliffe and the circumstances which have led Spens to believe they are on first name terms. All he can do is reply, in his stiffest manner, 'Good morning, Mr Spens.'

'Edward, please.' Spens ushers him through to the kitchen, which is at the back of the house with windows opening onto the garden. Michelle would die of envy if she saw this kitchen, thinks Nelson. Everything is perfect; from the gleaming surfaces, to the yellow roses on the table, to the blue cushions on the wicker sofa (sofas in the kitchen – that would never happen in Blackpool), to the expensive Italian coffee machine chugging away in the corner.

'Coffee?' asks Spens, pulling out a chair for Nelson. 'This machine does a tolerable cappuccino.'

'Just black will be grand, thanks.'

To complete the picture, as Spens busies himself with the coffee, the perfect woman walks in from the garden. A gleam of honey-blonde hair, a flash of blue eyes, a general impression of suntan and scent and expensive clothes and the vision is holding out its hand to Nelson.

'My wife Marion,' says Spens shortly.

Marion wasn't at the medieval party (Nelson doesn't blame her) so this is Nelson's first meeting with Mrs Spens. His first thought is – never trust a man with a beautiful wife. He should know; he has one himself.

'Pleased to meet you,' says Marion Spens. Close up, her face is almost too perfect, the contours too smooth, everything too symmetrical. She looks nervous too, glancing at Edward before she speaks.

'Harry is just here to ask questions about Woolmarket Street,' says Spens heartily.

'They've found a body haven't they?' says Marion with a quick

flicker of eyes towards her husband. 'Roddy told me.'

'Roddy?' As far as Nelson knows, the Spens children are called Sebastian and Flora. Typical Newmarket Road names.

'My father, Roderick. Mad keen on history.'

'He said the body could be medieval,' offers Marion.

'I'm afraid it's far more recent than that,' says Nelson. 'I'd like to ask a few questions about your family's ownership of the house.' He is perfectly happy to talk in front of Marion. He has a feeling that she will give more away than her husband. Edward, it seems, has other ideas.

'No problem. Bring your coffee and we'll go through into the study. Excuse us, darling.'

The study is, of course, decorated in leather and dark wood. The bookcase displays pristine hardbacks and well-thumbed paperbacks. The walls are the colour of underdone roast beef.

Spens sits himself behind the desk, Nelson takes what is obviously the visitor's chair. Family photographs grin up at him, on the wall is a picture of a rugby team. Nelson is willing to bet that Spens is in the middle, holding the trophy.

'Well, Harry, this is all very mysterious.'

'Not at all, Mr Spens. Just following a line of enquiry. Your family lived at the house in Woolmarket Street from ...'

'From 1850. It was built by my great-great-grandfather Walter Spens.'

'I'm interested in the years between 1949 and 1955. Who would have been living in the house at that time?'

'My grandfather, Christopher Spens, his wife Rosemary and their children Roderick and Annabelle.'

'And Roderick is your father?'

'Sir Roderick. Yes.'

'I'd like to talk to him. Does he live locally?'

Edward pauses, fiddling with an executive toy on the desk.

'Well, actually he lives with us.'

'He does?' Wondering why on earth Spens didn't mention this before, Nelson asks, 'Is he in?'

'I believe so.'

'Could I speak to him?'

'Of course.' But Spens doesn't move. Finally he says, 'My father is in the first stages of senile dementia. He can seem lucid, very lucid, but he gets confused very easily. And when he gets

confused he gets ... upset.'

'I understand,' says Nelson, though he doesn't really. He has never met anyone with dementia and can't imagine what it would be like living with someone who is slowly losing their sense of themselves. It makes him see Edward and Marion in a rather different light. 'Must be hard,' he offers.

'Yes,' Spens agrees. 'Hardest on Marion because she's at home more. Sometimes, what with my father and the children ... though we have an au pair, Croatian girl, very good. And Dad keeps himself busy, has the Conservative Association, the Historical Society, still plays bowls. He's a silver surfer too. Better with new technology than I am. He's not an invalid yet.'

The 'yet' hangs on the air because the one thing Nelson does know about dementia is that it is irreversible.

'I'll get him for you,' says Edward. He smiles slightly. 'He'll probably be pleased. He loves talking about the old days.'

*

This is certainly true though Edward Spens hadn't mentioned that the old days included Ancient Rome, the Counter Reformation and the Crimean War. When he can get a word in, Nelson asks, 'Sir Roderick, do you remember your years at Woolmarket Street?'

'Remember them?' Roderick looks at him sharply from under bushy white eyebrows. 'Of course I do. I remember everything, don't I, Edward?' Edward agrees that he does.

'You would have been, how old?'

'I was born in 1938. I lived at the house until I left for Cambridge, when I was eighteen.'

That makes him seventy, Nelson calculates. No great age these days. His own mother has recently taken up line-dancing at seventy-three. Roderick Spens could be a decade older.

'You lived with your parents?'

'Yes, my father was the Headmaster of St Saviours on Waterloo Road. He taught classics as well.'

'The school's not there any more, is it?'

'No, it closed sometime in the sixties. Great shame. It was an excellent school.'

'Did you go there?'

‘Yes, it was my father’s school, y’see.’ He looks beadily at Nelson as if suspecting a trap. ‘My mother wanted me to go to Eton but m’father insisted. His word was law in our house.’

Nelson tries, and fails, to imagine one of his daughters saying the same about him. ‘And your sister ... Annabelle. Did she go there too?’

Roderick looks confused. ‘Annabelle?’

Edward Spens cuts in. ‘It’s all right, Dad.’ He turns to Nelson. ‘My father still gets upset when he talks about her. She died young, you see.’

‘How young?’ asks Nelson, his antenna up.

‘Five or six, I believe.’

CHAPTER 21

Ruth is at Woolmarket Street. The builders are starting work again tomorrow and she wants to collect the rest of the finds. Not that the other trenches have turned up anything very exciting – some more pottery, some glass, a few coins. But there might be something interesting there and she needs to check that the site is tidy. That's her job as lead archaeologist. It's another warm day and it's surprising how innocuous the site looks in the sunlight. Nevertheless, Ruth finds herself looking over her shoulder every few minutes and jumping when a squirrel runs across the wall in front of her.

Although she still has a plaster stuck rather rakishly over one eye, Ruth feels remarkably well after Saturday's trauma. The boy doctor had told her not to be alone in the night, 'in case you fall into a coma' he explained cheerfully, but Ruth had been so exhausted that she went to bed at nine and slept beautifully with only Flint for company. She's sure that it was the conversation with Nelson that caused her to sleep so peacefully. He knows. He may be agonised and conflicted and all the rest of it, he may now drive her mad by interfering at every stage in the pregnancy, but at least he knows. She is no longer entirely on her own. And this morning she had a civil, if stilted, conversation with her mother. Ruth didn't mention any of the events of the last few weeks but assured her mother that she was no longer feeling sick, had more energy, was not doing so much awful digging. 'I sailed through both my pregnancies,' said her mother smugly and Ruth is only too happy to allow her this victory.

The site is still deserted. Ruth had half expected to see Irish Ted and Trace. There is still some work to do back-filling trenches, though maybe they have decided not to bother in view of the fact that the house is shortly to be razed to the ground. Ruth collects the finds from the foreman's hut. No sign of him either, thank goodness. She looks across at the arch silhouetted against the blue sky. *Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit*. She must remember to ask Nelson to check when the arch was built. It seems a strange, grandiose thing to find in a private house. Ruth is reminded of Roman generals being granted triumphal arches when they

achieved great victories. She thinks of a trip she and Shona took to Rome a few years ago. The arch of Titus in the Roman forum, decorated with reliefs illustrating Titus's victory against the rebellious Jews. She remembers reading that it is meant to be impossible for a Jew to pass through the arch. 'I can do it,' Shona had exclaimed, running laughing underneath. 'You're not Jewish,' Ruth had objected. But Shona had been in the midst of an affair with a Jewish law lecturer and considered that this counted.

She should have another look at the trench where the cat was found but something makes her wary about going into the grounds, so far away from the main road. There is something heavy, something watchful, about the silence. Don't be silly, she tells herself, it's broad daylight. What can possibly hurt you? She shoulders her backpack and picks her way through the rubble, past the outhouses and into what was once the back garden. Was this ever the happy place that Kevin Davies remembers? Ruth tries to imagine children running laughing through the garden, swinging on the tree, throwing pennies in the wishing well. No, the well was covered up by then. She approaches the well now and looks inside. A dank, unpleasant smell meets her and she straightens up hastily. When was the well covered? That's another question for Nelson. The skulls must have been put in the well before the concrete cap was put in place. Skulls in a well. The words have a crazy, topsy-turvy sound, like a nightmare nursery rhyme. She thinks of the children on the beach. Ding Dong Dell.

The cat's trench is by the outer wall, bulging now with age. This is the boundary. Terminus, the God of boundaries. 'I pray to him whenever I go to Heathrow,' Nelson had said when he heard the name. She can't imagine Nelson on holiday somehow. She is sure that Michelle insists on somewhere sun-kissed and glamorous whereas Nelson is more suited to wilder, colder places – the Yorkshire moors, perhaps, or the Scottish Highlands. She can just picture him up to his waist in some freezing loch.

Ruth stands up, easing her back. It is really hot now and the air is still. She climbs out of the trench and walks along by the outer wall. The new buildings are obviously going to come up right to the edge of the boundary. So much for spacious apartments. The modern walls look brash and confident against the crumbling flint of the originals. There are still some apple trees here though,

and, in the far corner of the site, Ruth finds gooseberry and redcurrant bushes choked with thistles and dusty with builder's dirt. Blackberries too, the brambles reaching out like tiny, spiteful fingers. The flowers haven't set yet and, by the time they are berries, these bushes will have been ripped out to make room for 'spacious landscaped gardens with water features'.

'Blackberry and apple pie,' says a voice, 'now there's a dish fit for a king.'

Ruth wheels round. An elderly man in a dark suit is standing smiling at her. He has an unripe apple in his hand and, for one mad moment, Ruth thinks of Adam in the Garden of Eden. An older, sadder Adam come to mourn the devastation of paradise. Then she sees the clerical collar and her brain clicks into gear.

'Father Hennessey?'

'Yes.' The man holds out his hand. 'You have the advantage of me, I'm afraid.'

'Ruth Galloway. I'm an archaeologist.'

'An archaeologist?'

'I specialise in forensics.'

'Ah,' says Hennessey, understanding. 'You're involved in this sorry affair then.'

'Yes.'

Father Hennessey sighs. From Nelson's description, Ruth imagined that he would be a more aggressive presence, like one of the fire and brimstone preachers she remembers from her childhood. This man just looks sad.

'The building work's more advanced than I thought it would be,' he says. 'How on earth have they managed to cram so much onto one site?'

'By making everything extremely small,' says Ruth drily. 'The whole of one of these flats could probably fit into the drawing room of the original house.'

'You're right there,' says Hennessey, 'this was a grand house once.'

They walk back through the garden. Hennessey stops once to look at a fallen tree, patting its stump sadly. It is hotter than ever. Thunder weather, Ruth thinks. Her shirt is sticking to her back and her feet seem to have melted and are spilling over the sides of her shoes. She longs to be lying down.

When they reach the front of the house, Hennessey looks up at

the stone archway.

‘Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit. Everything changes, nothing is destroyed.’

‘The arch was there in your time then?’

‘Yes. It’s a folly, of course, but a rather magnificent one. And I always thought the words quite appropriate. After all, if you’re a Christian, you believe that death itself is just a change, not destruction.’

Ruth says nothing. Death is death as far as she is concerned. There is no way of cheating death except, perhaps, by having a child. But Hennessey’s words remind her of something. Max, on the beach with the Imbolc bonfire behind him, talking about Janus. ‘He’s not just the god of doorways but of any time of transition and change, of progression from one condition to another.’ The ultimate transition, from life to death.

‘Miss Galloway,’ Hennessey’s soft Irish voice cuts into her thoughts, ‘I wonder if you can show me ... where you found the body.’

‘All right. And it’s Ruth.’ She hates to be called ‘Miss’ and Dr Galloway seems too formal somehow.

Part of the front wall still stands, the steps and the stone portico. Was this from the same period as the arch? It has a similar grandiose feel. A folly, the priest had said. The words reverberate uneasily in Ruth’s head.

‘Careful here,’ she says as they go through the doorway. On the other side, the ledge of black and white tiles is still there. It will be the last thing to go, thinks Ruth. The last link to the old house.

‘This way.’ She leads Hennessey along the ledge. As they climb down into the trench, he stumbles and almost falls.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine.’ But he is breathing heavily. He must be in his late seventies or even eighties, Ruth thinks.

Ruth points to the pile of earth in front of her. ‘The body was buried directly under the doorstep. We’ve removed that. We tried to leave everything else undisturbed.’ She looks at Hennessey’s face. ‘We’re very careful,’ she finds herself explaining, ‘very respectful.’

Hennessey’s lips move silently for a second. Is he praying? Then he says, ‘Buried under the doorstep, you say?’

‘Yes.’ She doesn’t mention the foetal position.

‘And the skull was in the well?’

‘That’s right.’

Hennessey is silent for a few minutes and then he says, ‘Would you mind if I said a prayer?’

‘Go ahead.’ Ruth backs away. She finds public prayer embarrassing at the best of times but to be trapped in a trench with someone chanting in Latin and waving incense – it’s her worst nightmare.

However Hennessey’s prayer turns out to be mercifully short, the words muttered and not (as far as Ruth can tell) in Latin. At the end he takes a small bottle from his pocket and sprinkles water onto the earth.

‘Holy water,’ he explains. He looks at Ruth’s face. ‘You’re not a Catholic?’ He sounds amused.

‘No. My parents are Christians but I’m not ... anything.’

‘Oh, you’re something, Ruth Galloway,’ says Father Hennessey. He looks at her for a second and Ruth has the strangest feeling that he knows her very well, almost better than she knows herself. But then the moment passes and Hennessey says briskly, ‘I’m parched. Do you fancy a cup of coffee?’

*

Nelson is leaving the museum when he gets a call from Judy.

‘I’ve got Annabelle Spens’ death certificate, boss.’

‘Good. Anything interesting?’

He hears her rustling paper and he thinks of his father’s death certificate, those few stilted words encompassing all the pain and grief. His father’s cause of death had been ‘myocardial infarction’. At the time he had no idea what that meant.

‘Date and place of death,’ reads Judy. ‘24 May 1952, Woolmarket House, Woolmarket Street, Norwich. Cause of death: Scarlet fever. Children don’t get that any more do they?’

‘They get it,’ says Nelson, ‘they just don’t die of it.’ He stops as a party of schoolchildren stream past him, holding photocopied worksheets and trying to trip each other up.

‘She died at home,’ Judy is saying. ‘How come she wasn’t in hospital?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps it was more usual to nurse children at home in those days.’

‘But they had money, they could afford health care. This was before the NHS, wasn’t it?’

‘Early days of the NHS.’

The children push through the glass doors of the museum. He can hear their teacher telling them that they’re going to be divided into groups. ‘You’re in my group, Ryan.’ That’s your day ruined, Ryan, you poor sod.

‘What about the certificate of interment?’ he asks.

‘Tanya’s getting it,’ says Judy, sounding slightly pissed off. ‘Boss, do you really think that Annabelle was buried in the house and not in a grave?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Nelson. ‘But there’s something odd about that house. There’s something odd about this whole case.’

He had been to see the curator, to ask how the foetus model could have escaped from the museum and ended up at Ruth’s feet in the trench in Swaffham. The curator had been perfectly pleasant but unable to offer any answers. The stages of development model had been taken down from display a few weeks ago (they had had some complaints from parents) and the components placed in the store room. Who had access? Well, any of the museum staff. The more valuable exhibits were kept in a safe but who would steal a plastic model of a baby? Who indeed?

Nelson stands on the steps, looking about over the Norwich rooftops and wondering what his next move should be. Should he go back and question Edward Spens again? He is sure that the man is holding something back. Should he get back to the station and bully Tanya about the interment certificate? They need to get hold of the dental records too. He sighs. It’s a hot, muggy day and more than anything else he fancies diving into a pub for a cold beer. That’s what Clough would do, he’s sure of it.

‘Hi, Detective Chief Inspector.’

Nelson whirls round. A young woman with lurid purple hair is smiling cheekily up at him. Who is she? One of his daughters’ friends? A trendy acquaintance of Michelle’s?

‘I’m Trace,’ says the apparition. ‘From the dig.’

Oh yes. The skinny girl who was on the site the first day. The one they all think Cloughie fancies. Rather him than me, thinks Nelson, looking at the metalwork gleaming on Trace’s ears and lip. But she seems friendly enough.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asks.

‘Routine enquiries,’ he answers. ‘What about you?’

‘I work here, Mondays and Fridays. There’s not enough field archaeology to keep me busy all year round so I do some curatorial work, processing finds and that.’

Nelson has no idea what ‘processing finds’ means but he knows one thing: Trace could be an important contact within the museum. She might well know if anyone has been waltzing off with the exhibits. ‘Fancy a drink?’ he says.

Ruth tries to steer towards one of the picturesque cafés around Woolmarket Street but Father Patrick Hennessey heads like a bloodhound towards the shopping centre and Starbucks, a place Ruth loathes. ‘You can get a grand coffee in here,’ says Hennessey, rubbing his hands together. The air-conditioning is so strong that Ruth is shivering.

She notices some odd glances as they enter the café – the overweight woman with mud-stained trousers and a plaster over one eye, and the priest, red-faced in his black clothes. Ruth orders mineral water but Hennessey goes for the full skinny-latte-with-an-extra-shot-of-espresso palaver.

‘It’s impossible to get a decent coffee where I live,’ he explains.

‘Where do you live?’

‘In a godforsaken corner of the Sussex countryside.’ He says ‘godforsaken’ like he really means it.

‘Nelson, DCI Nelson, said it was very pretty.’

‘It’s pretty enough if you like trees. No, I’m a city boy. Born and brought up in Dublin. I’ve always lived in towns – Rome, London, Norwich.’

It sounds a bit like Del Boy’s van – New York, Paris, Peckham. Ruth suppresses a smile. ‘Norwich isn’t exactly cosmopolitan.’

‘Sure and it’s a fine town. I miss it. I miss my work, my parishioners, everything.’

‘You ran the children’s home, didn’t you?’

‘I started it and ran it, yes. I’d seen an orphanage in the East End of London, a place where the children lived together almost like a family. I tried to create something similar. Recruited all the staff myself. I chose young religious people, people who still had some ideals left.’

‘I met one of your ex ... residents. He remembered the place with great affection.’

Hennessey looks interested. ‘Who did you meet?’

‘Davies, I think his name was.’

‘Oh, Kevin Davies. He was a nice boy. He’s an undertaker now I believe. He always had a serious way about him.’

Ruth thinks of the worried, crumpled-looking Davies. She can’t imagine him as a child. She is sure that he always looked forty.

Hennessey is looking at her. He has very blue eyes, with white smile-lines etched against his weather-beaten face.

‘Must be a difficult job,’ he says, ‘uncovering the past.’

Ruth is struck by this description. Most people see archaeology as ‘digging up bones’ but ‘uncovering the past’ is really what it is. She looks at the priest with new respect.

‘It is hard,’ she says carefully, ‘especially in cases like this where you’re dealing with the fairly recent past and especially when there’s a child involved.’ She stops, feeling that she has said too much.

But Hennessey is nodding. ‘As a priest I’ve often come across things that are best kept hidden. But the truth has a way of coming to the surface.’

Like the bones under the doorway, thinks Ruth. If Spens hadn’t been so keen to develop the site, if Ted and Trace hadn’t dug in that exact spot, would they have remained hidden for ever? Or would the long-forgotten crime have risen to the surface, crying out for vengeance?

‘Sometimes it’s hard to know what’s true and what isn’t,’ she says.

‘Pontius Pilate would agree with you. “Truth” he said,

“what is that?” And he was a wise man, Pilate. A coward but a wise man.’

Ruth is slightly confused by the way he is talking about Pontius Pilate as if he might, at any moment, walk into Starbucks. ‘DCI Nelson will find the truth,’ she says, with more confidence than she feels, ‘if anyone can.’

‘Ah, DCI Nelson. He’s a fine man, I think. A man with morals.’ Ruth is furious to find herself blushing. ‘He’s a good detective,’ she says.

‘And a good man,’ says Hennessey softly, ‘which may prove more difficult for him.’

Rather reluctantly, Nelson settles for a coke but Trace asks for a pint of bitter.

‘I thought all archaeologists drank cider,’ says Nelson.

Trace pulls a face. ‘Cider’s for wimps.’

I could get to like this girl, thinks Nelson.

‘How long have you been an archaeologist?’ he asks.

‘I left uni five years ago. I did an MA in London and worked in Australia for a bit. I didn’t really want to come back to Norwich but my mum and dad live here and it’s cheaper to live with them. There’s lots of archaeology here too.’

‘Lots of prehistoric stuff,’ says Nelson. He knows this from Ruth.

Trace nods. ‘Bronze Age and Iron Age. And Roman. That’s my favourite period. The Romans.’

‘Did you see *Gladiator*? Great film.’

Trace snorts. ‘Films get everything wrong. All that decadent stuff, lying about eating grapes. The Romans brought law and order and infrastructure. We were nothing but a band of disparate warring tribes until they came along.’

Identifying ‘we’ as the British, Nelson says, slightly aggrieved, ‘They were invaders, occupiers, weren’t they?’

‘They were here for four hundred years. That’s more than fifteen generations. And, when they left, we forgot everything they taught us – all the stone building and engineering works, glass-making, pottery. We slipped into the Dark Ages.’

Nelson feels rather proud of this. They may have been here four hundred years, he thinks, but to us they were still foreigners, occupiers, with their fancy, glass-making ways. He does not say this to Trace though.

‘Have you been to the site in Swaffham?’ he asks. ‘Max Grey’s site?’

Trace’s face lights up. ‘Yes. I’ve done quite a bit of work there. He’s great, Max. He really knows his stuff. He did this great tour the other week for the Scouts. Made it all come alive.’

‘Do you get lots of visitors on the site?’

Trace shrugs. ‘A few. It’s become quite well-known since they mentioned it on Time Team. We’ve had some coach parties.’

‘Has Edward Spens paid a visit?’

Trace’s face, so open and animated when talking about the superiority of the Romans, becomes closed again. ‘I think he came

once. I wasn't there though.'

'Do you know him?'

'Everyone in Norwich knows him.'

*

'The Spens family,' Nelson tells his team, 'have lived in Norwich for generations. Walter Spens built the house on Woolmarket Road. He was, by all accounts, rather an eccentric. Had a collection of stuffed animals and liked to dress as an African chieftain.'

Clough, scoffing peanuts at the back of the room, coughs and almost chokes. Nelson glares at him.

'His grandson, Christopher Spens, was headmaster of St Saviours, the public school that used to be on the Waterloo Road. According to his son, Roderick Spens, he was a bit of a tartar, made his children call him sir and forced them to speak in Latin at mealtimes.'

Nelson stops. Sir Roderick had not described his father as a tartar, in fact he had sounded almost admiring, but Nelson had the strong impression of a cold, controlling man. He wonders if he is betraying his own prejudice against public schools, Latin and posh people in general.

Nelson looks at his team. Clough is still spitting out peanut crumbs. Tanya Fuller has her notebook open. Judy Johnson has her eyes fixed on Nelson's face, frowning slightly.

'Sir Roderick Spens is in the first stages of senile dementia,' continues Nelson, 'so his impressions are rather confused. He remembers his father very clearly but it upsets him to talk about his sister. According to the death certificate Annabelle Spens died of scarlet fever aged six. She died at home and is buried in the churchyard at St Peter and St Paul.'

He looks at the team, wondering if they realise the implications of this. Judy does, obviously, but Clough can sometimes be a bit slow on the uptake. Sure enough, it is Tanya who speaks, 'Could it be Annabelle who was buried under the door?'

'I don't know but I think we have to consider the possibility.'

'But they buried her.' This is Clough, sounding almost aggrieved.

'Yes but it might have been fairly easy, if they had the coffin at

home on the night before the funeral, to remove the body and then screw the lid on again.'

'Why would anyone do that?'

'I don't know,' says Nelson impatiently, 'but I intend to find out.'

'Dental records?' asks Tanya.

'Yes. You can get on to that, Tanya. The skull we found in the well had a filling in one of the teeth. That's unusual in such a young child. Should be fairly easy to match. I'm also going to find out if there's a DNA link between the dead child and Sir Roderick.'

'What if there aren't any dental records?' asks Judy.

'Then I'll dig up the grave,' says Nelson grimly.

CHAPTER 22

All in all, Nelson does not feel in the right frame of mind to attend an experimental production at the Little Theatre that evening. But, then again, when would he ever be in this particular frame of mind? However, he has promised Michelle and even the news that the play has been written by the ridiculous Leo from the medieval evening does not dent his determination to be a good husband.

‘What’s it about?’ he asks, as they edge through the streets looking for a parking space. The Little Theatre is in the new Arts Centre by the docks, a place so trendy that everything is in lower case, making it extremely difficult to read the signs.

Michelle is reading from a flyer which this Leo type has had the nerve to post to her.

‘*The Two-Faced God*. Narrated by Janus, the Roman God of beginnings and endings, this is a play about openings, about doorways and fissures and sexual orifices. The action stretches from Roman times, through the industrial and sexual revolutions and ends in a space station set in the distant future.’

‘Jesus wept,’ says Nelson. ‘Sexual orifices?’

‘Harry, you’re such a prude,’ says Michelle, examining her reflection in the passenger mirror. ‘All modern plays are about sex.’

Is he a prude? Nelson considers this accusation as he parks Michelle’s Golf in a space vacated by a moped. It’s true that he seldom finds Cloughie’s jokes funny and that he thinks that *Sex and the City* is borderline pornographic (and that’s just the shoes). But he’s a man of the world, sex is all very well in its place (he doesn’t allow himself to dwell very long on where that place is), it’s just that he doesn’t want to watch some weedy drama student going on and on about bodily functions. That’s not unreasonable, surely?

‘I’m not a prude,’ he says at last, ‘it’s just that there’s a time and a place.’

Michelle looks at him under her lashes. ‘You didn’t always think that way. Remember the ghost train on Blackpool pier?’

Nelson grunts. ‘We were young and stupid then.’ But he takes

her arm as they walk towards the theatre.

A motley collection of individuals are gathered in the foyer, drinking overpriced cocktails and squinting at the lower case programme. Michelle's employers Tony and Juan are there, surrounded by a group Nelson privately categorises as 'exotic'. There are a few older couples, looking worriedly at the photographs posted around the walls showing actors in Greek masks and very little else. There are lots of young people too, probably from the university.

'She's attractive,' says Michelle.

'Who?' Nelson is fighting his way back from the bar carrying a half of lager and a glass of white wine.

'There. With the red hair.'

Nelson looks and sees a striking-looking woman in black who seems strangely familiar. With her is ... Jesus Christ.

'Come this way.' He tries desperately to steer Michelle in the opposite direction. 'There's a seat.'

'I don't want a seat. Who's that with her? It's Ruth! Harry, look, it's Ruth.'

Michelle is off through the crowd. Nelson watches as she taps Ruth on the shoulder and is introduced to the redhead, whom he now recognises as the nutcase Shona who was involved in the Saltmarsh case. Ruth greets Michelle with every appearance of pleasure. She looks pale, he thinks, but otherwise well, wearing a loose red top over black trousers. Thank God for loose clothing. With any luck Michelle will think it's just fashion.

'Harry!' Michelle is beckoning imperiously.

Nelson stumps over and Ruth gives him a slightly mischievous smile.

'I wouldn't have thought this was your sort of thing, Nelson.'

'It was Michelle's idea.'

'Ruth took a bit of persuading too.' This is Shona, tossing back her hair and twinkling at Nelson. He stares impassively back.

'We met Leo at Edwards Spens' party,' explains Michelle. 'I thought he was very interesting.'

'He's taken some fascinating ideas from Greek and Roman theatre,' says Shona, wearing an intense, twitchy look which makes Nelson fear that an intellectual conversation is on its way.

'Are you looking forward to the play?' Ruth asks him. She is drinking orange juice and looks happier than he has seen her for

weeks. He feels his lips moving into a grudging smile.

‘No. You know how thick I am. I don’t even eat yoghurt because it’s got culture in it.’

Ruth laughs. ‘I can’t say I’m looking forward to it either but Shona thought a night out would do me good.’

Nelson lowers his voice. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Fine. No ill-effects at all. I was at the Woolmarket Street site today.’

Nelson bristles. ‘On your own?’

‘I met Father Hennessey.’

‘Hennessey? What was he doing snooping around?’

‘I think he just came to have a look round. Don’t you always say that people come back to the scene of a crime?’

‘Yes, but whose crime is it?’ answers Nelson soberly. ‘That’s what we need to find out.’

*

The play is as bad as Nelson fears. A man in a mask appears in front of a black curtain and drones on about January. Then he puts on another mask and drones on about the lottery and choices and whatnot. At least this reminds Nelson that he hasn’t bought his ticket for Wednesday’s draw yet. Then the curtain goes up and there are these people in togas having an orgy, only they can’t have much of one because the production obviously can’t stretch to more than four actors. Then the curtain comes down and the man in the mask drones on about women’s rights, puts on his other mask and starts on about rape. The curtain goes up and there are two people in Victorian dress having breakfast. Turns out the man is seeing a prostitute and the woman kills herself. Up pops Chummy in the mask again and goes on about terminations and oral sex and the pill. Cue a blast of sixties music and the four actors at another orgy, only this time with LSD rather than grapes. Somebody dies of a drug overdose and the others sing ‘Yellow Submarine’ as a kind of funeral dirge. The man in the mask appears to say it’s all the fault of the planets and the jolly foursome appear in space suits to say that the Earth has finally disappeared into its own orifice. Cue applause and calls for ‘Author, Author’.

‘Jesus,’ says Nelson as they file out of the doors, ‘what a load of

crap.'

'Shh.' Michelle looks round. 'Leo's just over there.'

Nelson looks and sees the bearded playwright surrounded by admiring friends. He thinks he sees Shona's red hair in the crowd but there's no sign of Ruth.

'I'll arrest him under the Public Decency Act,' Nelson mutters.

'Shh.'

In the car, Michelle admits that the play was dire and she even agrees to stop off for a Chinese. Cheered, Nelson hums under his breath as he negotiates the Norwich suburbs, the car flying merrily over the speed bumps.

'So,' says Michelle chattily, 'what did you think of Ruth?'

Nelson stops humming. 'What do you mean?'

Michelle laughs. 'Oh Harry, you're hopeless. Didn't you notice?'

'Notice what?' Be careful, he tells himself.

But Michelle is still laughing. 'She's pregnant.'

Nelson counts to ten, keeping his eyes on the road.

'Hadn't you noticed?'

'You know me,' he says, 'I never notice anything.'

'A fine detective you make,' teases Michelle.

'You don't know for sure that she's pregnant,' counters Nelson.

'Yes, I do. I asked her when we went to the loo together.'

Nelson curses women's inability to go to the loo on their own. And why do they have to chat? Catch men chatting in the bog. No wonder women always take so long in there.

'She didn't say who the father is,' Michelle continues, leaning forward and fiddling with the car's radio.

'Didn't she?'

'No. I bet it's her ex-boyfriend. You know he went back to his wife?'

'Did he?'

Michelle changes stations until she finds some music she likes. A woman's voice fills the car, telling him that girls just want to have fun. 'You know, Harry,' says Michelle slowly. 'I'd like to help Ruth a bit.'

Careful, Harry, he tells himself again. Careful.

'Why?'

'Because she's going to have a baby and she's on her own and she's not with the father. I'm sure she's got lots of friends at the university, people like that weird warlock who gave us the

dreamcatchers, but we're probably the only *normal* family she knows. So I'd like to help her. Take her shopping for baby stuff, that sort of thing.'

In all the years he's known her, Michelle has never wanted to take another woman under her wing. Why, thinks Nelson despairingly, does she have to start with Ruth? He glances at his wife. She is smiling to herself, twisting the ends of her blonde ponytail like a little girl.

'All right,' he says at last, 'anything you say.'

*

Ruth is in a good mood as she drives home. She has survived a social event without being sick or rushing to the loo a million times. Even though the play was terrible it was nice to go out for the evening, to see well-dressed people and to talk about something other than bones and decapitation and death. It was nice too to spend time with Shona. Maybe they will be able to stay friends even after Ruth has passed into the shadowy Mother World. Even seeing Nelson and Michelle hadn't been too bad. It had been a bit of a shock when Michelle had asked her about the baby but she supposes that everyone will know soon. And, the funny thing is, she *would* like to go shopping for baby clothes with Michelle. Ruth is dreadful at shopping. It is a female ritual that she has never mastered. Other women can disappear into a shop for half an hour and come out with piles of tasteful clothes in the right size, artfully matching accessories and the perfect pair of shoes. Ruth can shop all day and still only have a T-shirt two sizes too small to show for it.

And she needs a woman friend. Someone who is not jealous or disapproving but who has had children herself and is ready to give advice and encouragement. It's just a pity that the only woman who fits the bill is the wife of her baby's father who, if she knew the truth, would certainly never speak to Ruth again.

She sighs as she turns onto the Saltmarsh road. The light and noise and colour of the Little Theatre seem a million miles away. Here everything is dark and still. Far off she can hear the roar of the sea. Strange how loud it is at night. The tide must be coming in. At high tide water covers the salt marshes completely, stopping at the freshwater marsh only a few hundred yards from

Ruth's front door. Sometimes, on nights like this, it is hard to believe that the waters won't engulf her altogether, leaving her little house bobbing on the waves like Noah's ark. As Ruth knows to her cost, one should never underestimate the sea.

An animal runs out into the road, its eyes glassy in her headlights. A cat, maybe, or a fox. She hopes it isn't Flint. When she parks outside her house, the security light comes on, bathing everything in theatrical brightness. Maybe she should leap out and start declaiming a speech about Janus. But, unlike Shona for instance, Ruth has never wanted to be an actress. Giving lectures is one thing, emoting on stage quite another. She gets out her bag and starts scrabbling for her key. Since her mother bought her an organiser handbag she has never been able to find anything. Christ, her back hurts. She is longing to sit down with a cup of tea and a giant ham sandwich.

There it is. Ruth hauls out her house key attached to a black cat key ring (a present from her nephews). Then she stops. The light is still on and the sea is still thundering away in the distance. But there is now another sound too. Very faint but unmistakably there. The sound of breathing.

Frantically, Ruth fits the key into the lock and throws herself into her house. Once inside, she puts on the lights and double locks the door. The security light goes off and outside there is complete darkness. Trembling, Ruth turns off her own lights in order to see outside. But, even though she presses her face to the glass, there is nothing. Blackness.

Flint rubs against her leg and she jumps. Stroking him calms her down. Relax, she tells herself, it's nothing. Just a fox or some other animal. But Ruth knows that the breathing, heavy and regular, was that of a human. A human, moreover, who is still outside, still waiting for her. Is it the person who left the baby for her to find, who killed the cockerel and wrote her name in blood on the wall? If she opens the door, what will she see? Will it be the Goddess Hecate herself, flanked by two spectral hounds, the moonlight white on her skeletal face? Or will it be only too human, the killer who murdered a child and threw her head down a well? The killer who has now, inexorably, come back for Ruth.

She doesn't know how long she stands there, stroking Flint and looking out into the night. It is as if, as long as she doesn't move,

she will be safe. As soon as she moves, *he* will move. The unknown person outside. He will move and he will come for her. Tears come to her eyes.

A tiny movement in her stomach brings her back to herself. She has to protect her baby. The creature outside can't move through solid walls after all. Gathering Flint in her arms, she turns away from the window and stumbles upstairs to bed.

*

She is woken by Flint meowing outside the front door. He often declines to use the cat flap, preferring the personal touch. Groggy with sleep, Ruth descends the narrow staircase and opens the door. A dawn mist billows in from the marshes. Flint is halfway down the path, his mouth open in outrage. On Ruth's doorstep is a dead calf. A black calf. A calf with two heads.

CHAPTER 23

‘What is it?’

‘It’s an exhibit,’ says Nelson, ‘from the museum. Just like the baby.’

Ruth had called Nelson immediately and he was with her in ten minutes. He is wearing a tracksuit and his hair is wet. ‘I was at the gym,’ he says, seeing her questioning glance.

‘I thought you hated the gym.’

‘It was Michelle’s idea. We go before work. Not bad when you get used to it. I like the pool. A swim sets you up for the day.’

‘If you say so.’

Nelson is kneeling in her front garden, examining the calf which, she now sees, is stuffed. Close up, it looks less sinister and more pathetic, its fur threadbare in places, its four eyes glassy. The second head is really just a protrusion from the neck with rudimentary ears and muzzle. The eyes have obviously been added by the taxidermist to contribute to the freak effect. Ruth feels sorry for it but she still wishes that it hadn’t turned up on her doorstep. Is it an offering from whoever was lurking outside her house last night?

‘The Two-Headed Calf of Aylsham,’ says Nelson, straightening up.

‘What?’

‘Like I said, it’s from the museum. They’ve got a collection of stuffed animals. Apparently this little chap was quite famous in Victorian times. Used to travel round with one of these fairs exhibiting freaks and suchlike.’

‘But how did the Two-Headed Calf of Aylsham end up on my doorstep?’ asks Ruth, aware that she sounds both petulant and terrified.

Nelson shrugs but his face is sombre. ‘I don’t know. I’ll get back on to the museum today. I was only there yesterday.’

‘Were you? Why?’

‘Asking about the model baby. Seems that someone likes leaving these things for you to find.’

But why, thinks Ruth. And why does she get the feeling that the person, whoever it is, is getting nearer and nearer, is

becoming angrier and angrier. Aloud she says, 'Would you like breakfast? A cup of coffee?'

'No thanks. I'd better be getting on. I'll take Chummy with me.' And, pulling on plastic gloves, he staggers off down the path, carrying the two-headed calf.

*

Ruth watches him go. The sight is made more surreal by the fact that the mist is still clinging to the ground, obliterating everything up to waist height. Nelson's torso, with the weird two-headed shape beside it, seems to be floating on a white cloud. Ruth shivers. The morning air is cold and she is wearing only a jumper pulled on hastily over her pyjamas. She is sure that her hair is standing up wildly and her face feels puffy from sleep. She must have presented a nice contrast to Michelle, whom Nelson would have left at the gym, her toned body encased in a designer tracksuit. Oh well. She pads over the wet grass towards the cottage. She'll have a shower and get dressed. She is due at the hospital at ten. It's time for her next scan.

But, before she can get to the bathroom, her phone rings. It's Nelson ringing from his car. 'I'm thinking it's not safe for you to be alone in the house with this nutter out there. Have you got anywhere you can go?'

'No,' says Ruth flatly. Once, under similar circumstances, she stayed with Shona. Never again.

Nelson sighs. 'Then I'll send someone to sleep at the cottage.'

'No!'

'I have to, Ruth. You're in danger.'

'All right. As long as it's not Clough.'

He laughs. 'I'll send my best WPC.'

Ruth puts down the phone feeling both irritated and obscurely comforted. She stumps back upstairs and goes into the bathroom. She feels exhausted already and it's not nine o'clock yet. Just as she steps into the shower, the phone rings again. Bloody Nelson. Probably just ringing to tell her not to slip on the soap. She considers leaving it but the fear that the call might be bad news (something happening to one of her parents) makes her descend the stairs again.

It's Max. 'Hi, Ruth. Hope I'm not ringing too early. Just

wondered how you were feeling, you know, after Saturday.'

Was it only Saturday night that she was in hospital? It seems weeks ago. 'I'm fine,' she says.

'I was wondering ... about your Norwich site ...'

'Yes?'

'Well, could I come over and have a look? You mentioned that you'd found some Roman pottery ...'

Ruth is silent for a moment. She knows that she invited Max to visit the Woolmarket Street site but she hardly expected him to take her up on the offer. The Roman finds have hardly been significant and the building work is starting again today. Why does Max suddenly want to see the site? Could it possibly be because he wants to see her again?

'I've got an appointment at ten,' she says, 'but I could meet you on the site at eleven thirty.'

'Perfect. I'll see you then.'

This time she runs back upstairs and sings in the shower.

*

The Two-Headed Calf of Aylsham causes quite a stir at the station.

'See you've got a new pet, boss.' This is Clough.

'How disgusting.' Leah.

'What's it doing here?' Judy.

'Is it from the museum?' Tanya, bright-eyed and eager.

Nelson puts the calf in the incident room. He doesn't want it in his office; the glassy stare is beginning to freak him out.

'Cloughie! I want you to take this thing back to the museum and find out how it got out.'

'Maybe it just fancied a walk?'

Nelson ignores this. 'Find out who had access to the exhibits. Tanya!'

'Yes?'

'I need you to look after Sir Roderick Spens. He's coming in today for a DNA test.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Judy, I need you to stay with Ruth Galloway for a few days.'

Judy looks put out for some reason. He hopes she isn't going moody on him. 'Why?' she asks.

‘Because I think someone is going to try to kill her.’

*

This scan seems very different from the first. Ruth knows what to expect and, having had a scan after her accident, she feels pretty sure that the baby is all right. She can even feel him moving now, little butterfly motions rippling across her stomach, quite unlike any other sensation she has ever experienced. ‘It feels as if something’s moving about inside me,’ she had said in answer to Shona’s query. ‘But that’s what it is,’ Shona had replied.

She is ushered into the room with the ultrasound. They are running late as usual and she begins to worry that she won’t get to the site for eleven thirty. The technician rubs gel onto her stomach and, miraculously soon, there are the grey, cloudy insides of her womb. Ruth leans forward.

‘There’s the baby’s legs. Long legs.’ The technician presses some buttons. ‘There’s a good one of the face.’ Ruth looks and sees only overlapping shapes, like a Cubist painting. The technician points, ‘There’s the nose.’ And then Ruth sees an actual profile: forehead, tiny nose, lips, chin. She even thinks she can discern an expression, stern and serious.

‘Do you want to know the sex?’ asks the technician.

Ruth is surprised quite how much she does want to know. Somehow her relationship with this creature, this *person*, has become such that she can’t not know.

‘Oh ... yes please.’

The technician points. ‘We can never be one hundred per cent certain but I’m pretty sure it’s a girl.’

Ruth stares. ‘A girl?’

‘Well, sometimes the tackle’s hidden, if you know what I mean, but we’re getting a pretty good full-frontal here. I think you’ve got a girl.’

A girl. A daughter.

*

Nelson is having a trying morning. Clough seems to be taking a hell of a long time at the museum. Probably stuffing his face at the café. Or maybe he’s met up with Trace and they’re having a cosy chat about the Romans. Then Roderick Spens arrives, all

confused charm and long stories, and has to be coaxed through the testing routine. Judy would have handled it better, thinks Nelson, watching as Tanya tries to shepherd the old man out of the office. Firm but polite, that's what you need to be. But he's never been that good at the touchy-feely stuff himself.

Then, to cap it all, Whitcliffe pays him a visit.

'Morning, Harry. Just popped in to see how the Woolmarket Street case was progressing. Had a call from Edward Spens. Seems he's a bit worried about his old dad being involved.'

Typical, thinks Nelson. Edward Spens is just the sort of man to complain to the boss. The warmer feelings engendered by Spens' kindness to his father are quickly dispelled.

'Sir Roderick's here now,' he says. He has a feeling Whitcliffe already knows this. 'We're seeing if there's a DNA match with the body. One of my WPCs is looking after him.'

'Is it likely there'll be a match?'

Nelson explains about Annabelle Spens but Whitcliffe still looks dubious. 'Clutching at straws a bit, aren't you, Harry?'

'Perhaps.' Whitcliffe calls Nelson Harry but there is no way that Nelson can call him Gerry. He's not about to call him 'sir' though.

Whitcliffe is about to say something but Nelson's phone suddenly buzzes with a text message. Nelson picks it up. 'Excuse me.'

The message is from Ruth. Three words. 'It's a girl!'

Nelson stares. In the background Whitcliffe is droning on. 'Important local businessman ... relations with the wider public ... care and respect for the elderly ...' But Nelson can only think about Ruth's text. A girl. Another daughter. He can hardly believe it. Ruth had been so sure she was having a boy and, somehow, he had believed it too. Michelle is so ultra-feminine it had always seemed impossible that she could give birth to a male. But Ruth, tough and independent, he had been sure that she would have a son. Another daughter. Well, he needs no practice in loving a daughter.

'Harry?'

'Yes. Yes. Of course. Consider it done.'

Whitcliffe looks at him curiously and Nelson wonders what he is agreeing to. But the answer seems to please his boss who swaggers out of the office in high good humour.

As soon as the door has closed behind him, Nelson rings Ruth.

‘Ruth! Is this true?’

She laughs. ‘Apparently so. We’re having a girl.’

‘But you were so sure it was a boy.’

To Nelson’s irritation, he sees that Sir Roderick Spens has wandered in, closely followed by Tanya. Nelson waves a hand for them to leave.

‘I know but the radiographer was pretty certain.’

‘Another girl. My God.’

‘Are you pleased?’

He laughs. Of course he isn’t pleased, Ruth’s pregnancy could be about to blow his marriage sky-high but, on another level, of course he is pleased. He is delighted.

‘Where are you?’ he asks.

‘On my way to the Woolmarket Street site.’

‘I’ll meet you there.’ He looks at his watch, it is twenty past eleven. ‘I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.’

And he rings off before Ruth has a chance to say that she is meeting Max.

*

The site is busy again. Diggers trundle to and fro and a large skip is blocking the entrance. Max, wearing a hard hat, is standing by the foreman’s hut looking glum.

‘I didn’t think the building work would be so advanced.’

‘I think they’re making up for lost time,’ says Ruth. ‘Nelson says that Edward Spens is desperate to get the work finished.’

‘Typical.’

Ruth looks curiously at Max. ‘Do you know him then?’

‘We were at university together.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, we both read history at Sussex.’

Ruth thinks about the suave figure she met on the site. It’s hard to connect him to Max but, come to think of it, they must be about the same age.

‘How come he ended up running a building firm?’ she asks.

‘It’s the family business. He always said his dad would insist on it.’

‘Are you still in touch with him?’

Max looks slightly sheepish. ‘Just Friends Reunited, that sort of

thing.'

Ruth loathes Friends Reunited. She has kept in touch with the few people she liked at school and university. As far as she is concerned, the less the rest know about her the better.

'Come on,' she says, 'I'll show you round.'

The foreman is obviously irritated to find archaeologists under his feet again but he agrees to let Ruth show Max over the site 'as long as they keep out of the way'. But, when Ruth goes to find the grave under the door, it has disappeared. The black and white tiles have been broken up and the ground is a seething mass of mud. No walls or divisions can be seen, just a level stretch of ploughed-up earth.

The well is still intact. The diggers haven't got this far but they are looming. Ruth can see their mechanical claws churning up the garden, the vegetable patch, the tree with the swing, the cucumber frame. Soil and rubble pour into the skips. Who knows how many artefacts are there – medieval, Roman, Victorian? All destroyed to make room for seventy-five luxury apartments, each with en-suite bathroom.

Max kneels and looks into the well. 'Design looks Roman.'

'That's what I thought.'

'Heads have been found in Roman wells haven't they?' asks Ruth.

'Sometimes,' Max replies cautiously. 'At Odell in Bedfordshire they found a Roman skull deliberately inserted into the lining of a well. Head cults are more Celtic though. And holy wells were common in medieval times. St Thomas's well at Windleshaw was said to have sprung up where a priest was beheaded.'

The noise of the diggers is making it hard to speak. Ruth is about to suggest they leave the site when she sees Nelson coming towards them, frowning as he strides through the rubble. She had forgotten about Nelson.

'Does he follow you everywhere?' mutters Max.

Nelson, too, seems less than pleased to find that Ruth has company. 'Long time no see,' he says drily to Max.

Ruth can't stand much more of this. 'Come on,' she says, 'let's get out of here.'

They stop, as if by mutual consent, by the stone archway, still standing although the rest of the front wall has disappeared. Towers, archways, crenellations – all crumbled into dust.

‘Are they leaving the arch?’ asks Max.

‘Yes,’ says Ruth, ‘it’s classy apparently.’

They stand for a minute looking up at the words inscribed in the stone and Ruth sees another figure approaching. A man dressed in clerical black, walking slowly along the boards laid down over the churned-up earth. Father Hennessey. The foreman will have a fit, thinks Ruth.

Father Hennessey approaches and, suddenly, his face is filled with such recognition and delight that Ruth is stunned. Why on earth is he so pleased to see her? Or is it Nelson he is looking at?

But the priest looks straight past Ruth and Nelson. His blue eyes are full of tears.

‘Martin,’ he says, ‘how good to see you again.’

25th June

Ludi Taurii begin

An opportunity presented itself today. The mother had gone out, leaving the child asleep in its bed. It no longer sleeps in a cot but in a bed with bars at the side to stop it falling out. She was worried about leaving the child alone in the house with me but she was in pain from an infected tooth and needed to see the dentist urgently. I assured her smoothly that the child was safe with me, as indeed she will be. As soon as the mother had gone I got my knife and went straight into the room.

She was asleep, her mouth slightly open. She is not an attractive child, whatever the mother says. I turned her over so the neck was exposed. I could see a little pulse there. The perfect place.

To tell you the truth, dear diary, I had slightly been dreading this moment. Would I be struck by Pity, that emasculating emotion? Would I lack the requisite manliness to do the deed? But I am pleased to report that, as I stood above the infant like an avenging angel, I felt no pity at all. Rather a great joy swept over me, a feel of immense power and righteousness. Yes, that was it. I knew beyond any doubt that I was doing the right thing. My arm felt like steel, strong yet flexible. My eyes burned in my skull. I lifted the knife.

Then – oh banality! – the phone rang. Oh, evil modern influence, obtruding on the ancient rituals! Of course, the moment was ruined and I went to answer the infernal machine. It was Them. We chatted quite civilly but they will be back next week. So little time.

Still very hot. The house waits.

CHAPTER 24

At first Ruth does not understand what is happening. She looks from Hennessey to Max and back again, wondering as she does so why Nelson also looks so shell shocked. And it is Nelson who speaks first.

‘Martin,’ he says, ‘*you’re* Martin Black?’

Max laughs. A laugh Ruth has never heard before, harsh and slightly wild. ‘Black, Grey,’ he says, ‘what’s the difference?’

And then Ruth remembers. Martin and Elizabeth Black. The two children who had lived at the home and had vanished so mysteriously. Can it really be true? Can Max, who claimed to know nothing about the Woolmarket Street site, actually have lived here once? Is this why he has come back to Norfolk? And if he has kept this secret from her, says another, darker, voice in her ear, what else has he been hiding?

Father Hennessey now comes closer to Max, who has turned deadly white. ‘Martin,’ he says, in a voice choked with emotion, ‘I never thought I’d see you again. My dear boy.’

Max reaches out a hand and touches the priest’s arm. His eyes, too, are full of tears.

‘Father Hennessey,’ he says, ‘I never forgot you.’

‘And Elizabeth?’ It is barely a whisper.

‘She died.’ Max turns his face away.

Nelson’s voice is like a rush of cold air. ‘I think you need to answer a few questions, Mr Grey. Or is it Mr Black?’

‘I’ve done nothing wrong,’ says Max defiantly.

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ says Nelson. ‘Now, if you’d accompany me to the station.’

Max looks as if he is about to refuse but then he gives a little shrug and follows Nelson out through the archway. No wonder he knew what the inscription meant, thinks Ruth.

Father Hennessey hesitates and then, with an apologetic glance at Ruth, he hurries after the other men. Ruth is left on her own amongst the diggers.

Late afternoon and Ruth is at home. For the first few hours after the revelation at the building site she had been certain that either Max or Nelson was about to call at any minute. Surely someone was going to tell her what was going on? But as time passed and she fed Flint, made herself a light lunch (and heavy pudding), tidied the sitting room, put the washing on, answered emails and finally settled down to read a dissertation on 'The Archaeology of Disease', she had to face the fact that no one was going to think it worth updating her. She is peripheral to this case, the bones expert, the slightly eccentric academic. She is outside the main action. Max had lied to her, probably used her to get news of the Woolmarket Street site. Nelson forgets her the instant that he gets the scent of a breakthrough. The only person who thinks she is central to the case, she thinks bitterly, is the madman who keeps leaving museum exhibits for her to find.

But then, as the birds start gathering over the Saltmarsh for their evening spectacular, thousands of little black dots like iron filings dividing and converging against the sky, Ruth sees a black Range Rover draw up beside her gate. Max.

She goes to the door, uncertain how she feels. On one hand she just wants to know what the hell is going on, on the other she has decidedly mixed feelings about Max Grey. Martin Black, of course, she doesn't know at all.

He looks desperately tired, chalk white with dark rings under his eyes. Five hours of questioning by Nelson can't be fun for anyone, of course, but Ruth now realises that he has been looking strained for some time, probably ever since the news of the body under the doorway. No, before that, from the moment he realised that Ruth's site was the old children's home, when she asked him about the words cut into the archway. Despite herself, Ruth feels sorry for him.

'How are you?' she asks.

'I've felt better.'

'Do you want a cup of tea?'

'A drink would be good.'

She gets him a glass of wine and makes herself a herbal tea (so disgusting that it must be good for her).

They sit for a minute in silence then Max says, 'I'm sorry.'

'What for?'

'For lying to you.'

‘You didn’t exactly lie, you just didn’t tell me.’

He smiles. ‘Father Hennessey would say that was the same thing.’

‘It’s incredible that he recognised you after all that time.’

‘He said it was partly the setting. Seeing me standing by the archway. Jesus – when you asked me what those words meant! They’re burned into my heart.’

He takes a gulp of wine. His hands are shaking.

‘What happened at the police station?’ Ruth asks.

‘Oh, Nelson took a statement. Went on for hours. They took fingerprints and everything. Talked to Father Hennessey too but they wouldn’t let him stay when they questioned me.’

‘What did they question you about?’

‘My disappearance. After all, I’ve been a missing person for over thirty years. And about Elizabeth.’

His voice breaks when he says her name. He rubs his eyes.

Ruth says gently, ‘You said she died?’

Max looks up and now his eyes are hard. He stares at Ruth as if he doesn’t see her.

‘She died,’ he says. And he is not talking to Ruth but to someone else, himself perhaps, and she knows, somehow, that it is twelve-year-old Martin Black who is speaking.

‘We wanted to get to our dad. I’d had it all planned. I’d got his address from Father Hennessey’s records. He always let me go into his office. I stole enough food to last us. I’d even got a tent from the storehouse – Father Hennessey used to take us camping sometimes. It was all fixed but Elizabeth ... she didn’t really want to go. She liked it at the home. She loved Sister James, the nun who taught the little ones. She felt safe there. But she loved me more.’ For a second he sounds almost triumphant. ‘She loved me so she went with me. Only thing she wanted to take was her blasted stuffed dog.’

And Ruth sees Max’s bed on the boat: the classical text open on the side table and the stuffed toy on the pillow. Elizabeth’s dog.

‘At first it was OK. We stayed in an abandoned warehouse the first night and then we headed for London. I’d brought our old school uniforms. I knew they wouldn’t be looking for children in uniform and I was lucky. There was a school trip to London that day so we tagged along behind them. No one noticed us. But when we got to London, that’s when it started.’

‘What started?’

‘Elizabeth got sick. She’d always had lots of sore throats and colds so at first I thought it was that. I stole some throat stuff for her and she seemed better for a while. We were staying outside Swindon in an empty school. We had to head west, you see, to Holyhead. Jesus – that school. It had big snakes and ladders painted on the playground, on the tarmac. Elizabeth was scared of them. At night she thought they were coming to get her. We were sleeping in the staffroom. They had sofas in there. But she had a fever, she used to scream. It was like she didn’t know me. She used to scream for our mum.’

His voice has all but died away. He is sitting slumped forward, head in hands. Flint has abandoned him. Ruth doesn’t want to hear any more. The thought that the five-year-old Elizabeth might have died in that empty school, with only her twelve-year-old brother to care for her, is almost too awful to contemplate. And, if she can’t contemplate it, what about Max, who has kept this secret all these years? But Ruth also feels that, having started telling his story, it would be good for him to finish it. So she prompts gently, ‘What happened?’

Max looks at her, his gaze anguished. ‘She died. Just like that. I woke up one morning and she was dead. Lying on the sofa with a rug over her and she was dead. Her little face was cold ...’ He turns away and, after a few seconds, continues in a harder voice. ‘I buried her in the school grounds. They had a little vegetable patch where the earth was soft and I buried her there. I was going to bury Wolfie, her dog, with her but, when it came to it, I couldn’t bear to. It smelt of her, you see. I buried her and I went on. I suppose Nelson will dig her up now. Bit of a shock for some poor primary school.’ He laughs harshly.

‘What happened to you?’

‘Oh, I got to Ireland but when I saw my dad, he was drunk as a lord, didn’t know me from Adam, so I didn’t hang around. I lived rough for a while and got taken in by some travellers, gypsies. They were kind to me. I used to help with the horses, they went to lots of horse fairs and they had ponies that just roamed free, even in the cities. The children went to local schools sometimes. I went with them and got interested in history again. Met a teacher in one school who liked me and he encouraged me to stay and take some exams. I lived with him and his family. They were kind

too. I called myself Max Grey by then. I took O Levels and A Levels and, eventually, got into Sussex. End of story.'

'Why did you come back here?' asks Ruth.

'Well, mostly it was the Roman dig. I am an archaeologist after all. But I suppose I wanted to see the home again. I wanted to but I was scared. DCI Nelson said that runaways almost always go back to the place that they ran away from. Well, I suppose I was no exception. Then, when you were excavating the site, I couldn't believe it. I wanted to tell you, Ruth, I really did.'

He is looking at her earnestly. Martin Black has vanished and he is Max Grey again, soft-spoken and unthreatening.

'That's OK,' she says, 'it must have been ... awful for you.' She is aware how inadequate this sounds.

'I couldn't face going to the site at first, but then I couldn't resist it. I suppose I just wanted to see it one last time. Then, seeing Father Hennessey like that ...'

'I think he was very fond of you.'

'He was really good to me. I was a delinquent in those days. Got into fights, swore, stole, but he never gave up on me. He always thought I'd make something of myself.'

'He was right,' says Ruth.

'Was he?' They look at each other and suddenly the moment is charged, by sadness, understanding and, unexpectedly, by something else, something that makes Ruth blush and turn away.

'Ruth?'

But the spell is broken by the doorbell. Judy Johnson is on the doorstep, an overnight bag in her hand.

'Hi, Ruth. I've come to stay for a few nights.'

CHAPTER 25

The DNA results are waiting on Nelson's desk when he gets into work in the morning. He studies them, black coffee in hand. They prove, without a shadow of a doubt, that Roderick Spens is related to the body found under the doorway. More than that, they show that Roderick and the dead child share a common male ancestor. Nelson frowns down at the printout in his hand, thinking hard.

Finding Martin Black had been a bolt from the blue. Despite his theory about offenders returning to the scene of the crime, Nelson never honestly expected to find Martin Black wandering around the ruins of the former children's home. And never in a million years did he connect the smug archaeologist who seems to dog Ruth's footsteps with the twelve-year-old boy who went missing. 'People grow up,' he always tells his team, 'you're not looking for a little boy, you're looking for a man in his forties.' But, even so, the distance between Dr Max Grey and desperate runaway Martin Black seemed too vast to be straddled by one person.

And his story – his story had been heart-rending. The little girl dying in the empty school (possibly of meningitis, Nelson suspects), the grief-stricken brother burying the body. It is just outlandish enough to be true. Well, they'll know when they find the school and dig up their vegetable patch. The press will love that.

Briefing is at nine. Tanya has her notebook open in front of her, Clough enters the room still chewing, Judy is drinking tea.

'Everything all right at Ruth's?' Nelson asks her.

'Not a sound all night.'

'Is Ruth OK?'

Judy looks at him curiously. 'She seems fine. She had a friend there when I turned up.'

'Who?'

'That archaeologist chap. The one who was here yesterday.'

'We need to talk about him,' says Nelson. He tells the team about the unexpected appearance of Martin Black.

'Bloody hell,' says Clough, still chasing stray bits of breakfast around his mouth, 'was it really him?'

‘Father Hennessey verifies it. According to Black, he and his sister ran away, hoping to get to Ireland. Elizabeth became ill and died in a deserted school outside Swindon.’

‘Do you believe him?’ asks Clough.

‘I never believe anyone without checking first. But, in any case, we’ve established that the body at Woolmarket Street can’t be Elizabeth Black. We’ve had the DNA results,’ he pauses impressively, ‘and they show that Sir Roderick Spens and the dead child share a common male ancestor.’

‘So it could be Annabelle Spens?’ gasps Judy.

‘It’s possible. Tanya, how are you getting on with tracing Annabelle’s dental records?’

‘It’s difficult,’ says Tanya, rather defensively Nelson thinks. ‘I’ve been through all the dentists operating in Norwich in the forties and fifties. None of them are still practising and their records have vanished.’

‘Keep trying,’ says Nelson. ‘According to our expert there was some pretty fancy dental work done on that little girl.’

‘If the child is Annabelle Spens,’ says Judy slowly, ‘who could have killed her? It was a really brutal death, stabbed and then beheaded.’

‘I don’t know,’ says Nelson, ‘but I do know that in cases where a child has been murdered the killer is almost always one of the family.’

‘Christopher Spens?’

‘It’s possible. He sounds a nutcase to me. All that stuff about Latin. Roderick Spens said his father kept a shrine to the Roman Gods in his garden. The well too. That was built by him, to an authentic Roman design apparently.’

‘What about the mother?’ asks Tanya. ‘What was she like?’

‘Sir Roderick says she was “like an angel” but I get the impression that he didn’t really know her that well. Probably brought up by a nanny. The mother died quite young, in 1957.’

‘Only a few years after her daughter,’ says Judy, ‘probably died of grief.’

‘This isn’t a woman’s magazine,’ says Nelson, ‘she died of pneumonia. Quite common in those days.’

‘All the same,’ says Clough, ‘they were an unlucky family, weren’t they?’

Ruth is having trouble working. Having Judy in the house forced her to get up early, offer to make tea, etc. But Judy said that she would get something at the station. She left at eight, looking far more together than Ruth ever manages before ten a.m., or indeed ever.

It had been unexpectedly pleasant to have company last night. Max had left almost as soon as Judy arrived and that had been a bit of a relief too. She feels that she needs time to absorb Max's story, to come to terms that Max Grey is, in fact, Martin Black. How could anyone go through all that and emerge the other side apparently normal and well-adjusted? If she had ever thought about Max's childhood she would have imagined a middle-class home, public or maybe grammar school, a smooth transition to university, the usual relationships and friendships along the way. Never a children's home, a dead sister, living rough, adopted by gypsies. Jesus – it's like *Wuthering Heights*. And there is, she admits, something slightly Heathcliffy about Max.

Ruth sits down at her table by the window. It is a dull morning, the grey marsh merging seamlessly with the grey sky. She opens her computer but, after staring at her lectures notes for a minute, closes it again. She opens a drawer and gets out a beautiful clean piece of paper. One of the few things she and Nelson have in common is a liking for lists. At the top of her list Ruth writes: Woolmarket Street. Then she lists everyone she knows who is connected to the site.

Children's Home

Father Hennessey

Max Grey (she stares at this name for a second before crossing it out and writing Martin Black)

Kevin Davies, undertaker

Other former residents

Staff (Max had mentioned a Sister James and she knows that Judy went to Southport to interview another nun)

Building Site

Edward Spens

Foreman and other building workers

Ted

Trace

She looks at the list for so long that Flint becomes bored and tries to sit on it. Ruth pushes him off. Anyone on the list could have put the two-headed calf on her doorstep, could have put the baby in the trench and written her name on the Roman wall. Of all the names, she has to face the fact that Max is the most likely. He knows about Roman ritual, he was the one who told her all that *I, Claudius* stuff in the first place; he has had the means and the opportunity. He was there when she found the writing on the wall. He was the one who found her in the trench after she had fainted. What if he had been there all along? What if he was the one who put the baby there (it was only the night before, after all, that she told him that she was pregnant)? As an archaeologist, he would have access to the museum; he could easily have got hold of the two-headed calf and the model baby too.

But why? Why would Max want to scare her, scare her to death, as he himself put it? To warn her away from the Woolmarket Street site? To prevent her from discovering his identity as Martin Black? Or is there some other mystery concerned with the old children's home?

She looks at the list again. If the body under the door was killed over fifty years ago, there is only one person who was alive at the time. Father Patrick Hennessey. Well maybe there are still some nuns or other staff members alive but Father Hennessey is the only one she knows. If there is a secret, he will be the one who knows it. Don't priests always know secrets? Isn't that the whole point of the Catholic confessional?

When they met at the site, Father Hennessey had given her his card. At the time, she had thought it amusing that a priest would possess something as worldly as a business card. Father Patrick Hennessey SJ it says, in discreet grey capitals. She has no idea what SJ stands for and she doesn't want to know. On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt to meet him again and ask him a few questions of her own.

Her hand hovers by the phone.

*

Judy is sitting at her desk, fuming. Bastard! How *dare* he sneer at her. 'This isn't a woman's magazine.' And in front of Tanya Fuller too. Judy likes Tanya. She's fun on a night out and she certainly

provides a welcome antidote to Clough and the rest of the lads. But Judy also knows that Tanya is competition.

Judy has been in the police force for three years. She's a graduate (something she doesn't often mention to Nelson) and, as such, on the so-called 'fast track' to success. When, after eighteen months, she'd been given the transfer to CID she felt that she really was on the way up. She loves detective work and she gets on well with Nelson whose bark is definitely worse than his bite. He may sound like an unreconstructed male chauvinist but, in practice, he is fair to the women in his team and (unlike some DCIs) does not view them as useful only in cases of rape or domestic violence. But somehow Judy feels that her career has stalled. She is a Detective Constable, by now she should be a Detective Sergeant, like Clough. She knows that Nelson has the funding for another sergeant so why hasn't he given her the stripes? At least until Tanya Fuller turned up she could be sure that she was the best candidate for the job. But now Tanya breezes in from another force with her intelligent questions and her eyes fixed adoringly on Nelson's face. What if Nelson promotes Tanya over Judy? She couldn't bear it. She'd jack it all in and become a bookie like her dad.

Judy is meant to be helping Tanya with the dentist search but instead she is going over the notes from the case. She is sure they are all missing something. And, if she spots it, that will mean one in the eye for Nelson, Tanya, all of them.

Idly she sketches a Spens family tree. She met Edward Spens once at a police do and found him rather attractive. This doesn't affect her deep-seated belief that his family have something to hide.

Sir Christopher Spens (d 1981) = Rosemary Spens (d 1957)

Roderick (b 1938) + Annabelle (b 1946, d 1952)

Charlotte + Edward

Tracy + Luke

Sebastian + Flora

She looks hard at the name Rosemary Spens. She hears Nelson's voice, speaking in the flat tone he uses for briefings: 'Sir Roderick says she was "like an angel" but I get the impression that he didn't really know her that well. Probably brought up by a nanny.' That's it. Judy goes back to the file and rifles through until she comes to the census of 1951. She remembers Clough reading it out to them: 'Christopher Spens, Rosemary Spens, children Roderick and Annabelle.' But, typically, Clough has overlooked something and Nelson's casual words have brought it back to her. There would have been other people in the house – servants, a cook and almost certainly a nanny. And, sure enough, there are four other names on the list:

Lily Wright – cook general

Susan Baker – domestic

Edna Dawes – domestic

Orla McKinley – nanny

Judy looks at the last name for a long time.

*

Clough, swallowing the last of a chunky doughnut-to-go, is in a stonemason's studio. The air is thick with dust and out of the fog loom disembodied shapes – columns, fireplaces, the occasional half-finished statue, horses and angels and Greek goddesses. Clough walks carefully through the stone figures thinking that it's like a book he read as a child where a witch turned her enemies into stone and then decorated her house with them. Either that or a graveyard.

They have had a bit of luck with the stonemason. The firm who made Christopher Spens' archway in 1956 are still in business. The actual mason has retired but his son is now in charge and has volunteered to bring his old dad into the studio to talk to the police. Clough now wends his way slowly towards the back of the vast room where the comforting sounds of Radio 1 are mingling with the smell of reheated coffee and calor gas. Clough sniffs appreciatively.

An old man is sitting in an armchair in front of the gas stove. A younger man, presumably the son, is chipping away at a small block of marble. Duffy is begging for mercy in the background.

'Mr Wilson?' Clough extends a hand. 'Detective Sergeant

Clough.'

The old man holds out a thin hand in a fingerless glove. 'Mr Wilson senior. Reginald Wilson. I assume it's me you wanted?'

'Well, yes, sir. As I explained to your son on the phone, we're interested in an archway you built in 1956, on Woolmarket Street. For Christopher Spens.'

Reginald Wilson gestures towards a cloth-bound book on his lap marked, in black ink, 1954–1958. 'It's all in the book. I always say to Stephen here, put it in the book. You never know when you might want to refer to it. But it's all computers these days. Not as safe as a book.' The younger man rolls his eyes good-naturedly.

Clough follows the shaking finger to an entry marked in pencil. 'Stone archway and portico. Portico with Roman-style columns. Archway, stand-alone, granite. Eight foot by four. Inscription to read: Omnia Mutantur, Nihil Interit.'

'Latin,' says Clough. 'Gobbledegook, eh?'

'I studied Latin at school,' says Reginald Wilson mildly. 'It's a fairly well-known saying. It was important to Mr Spens, I think, because of his daughter dying. He said that the arch was a memorial to her, a sign that nothing was ever really lost.'

Feeling snubbed, Clough says, 'What sort of a man was Christopher Spens?'

Wilson is silent for a moment, holding his hands out towards the fire. Then he says, 'He was always very courteous to me. Treated me as a craftsman. That's important in our line of work. But he was distant, if you know what I mean. Of course, he'd lost a child and that changes you. But he was a difficult man to know, that was my impression.'

'What about his wife, Rosemary?'

'I hardly saw her. I understood she was a bit of an invalid. We saw the son though, nice lad, he helped us dig.'

'Roderick?'

'Yes. He runs the business now, doesn't he?'

'His son, Edward.'

'Ah, fathers and sons.' Reginald Wilson glances at his son, working industriously on the marble, its sides shining in the light from the fire. 'That's what it's all about, isn't it? Passing the business on to your son. That's the only reason why any of us do it.'

On the way out, moving through the stone menagerie, Clough remembers the name of the book. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He must remember to tell Judy. She's always saying that he never reads anything.

27th June

Festival of Jupiter Stator

This morning a black dog appeared on the front lawn. Clearly a messenger from the goddess. As it paused on the lawn, it turned and looked at me (I was reading Suetonius in the drawing room). I looked back, sending a message, 'Is it soon, lady?' And she answered, 'It is soon.'

CHAPTER 26

‘How charming,’ says Father Hennessey politely, although the café chosen at random by Ruth is, in truth, anything but charming. Determined to avoid Starbucks she’d Googled ‘cafés Norwich’ and come up with Bobby’s Bagels, an old-fashioned greasy spoon with Formica tables and dirty net curtains. The owner (Bobby himself?) has at least three days’ worth of food spattered on his apron and is either talking on a hands-free phone or is in the grip of severe schizophrenia.

The café is, at least, fairly near to Woolmarket Street and Ruth was able to look in at the site as she went past. Apart from the archway, the old house has now vanished completely: reception rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, wishing well, outhouses all subsumed in a smooth sea of mud. At the back of the site, the new apartments are rising stealthily, now at first-floor height complete with flimsy-looking balconies. Edward Spens is obviously going all out to beat the property crash.

Ruth orders tea because she doesn’t trust the coffee. Father Hennessey orders coffee and, rashly, a bagel. This he eats with every appearance of relish despite the fact that the plate seems to have traces of egg on it. The priest looks completely calm and relaxed. It is Ruth who fiddles nervously with the sugar bowl and twice spills her (disgusting) tea.

‘You must have been delighted to see Martin again,’ she says.

Father Hennessey smiles. ‘Indeed I was. It was a great gift from God. I had feared I would die without knowing what had happened to Martin and Elizabeth.’

This is, presumably, more than a manner of speaking. Father Hennessey, Ruth knows from Max, is over eighty; death is no longer a metaphor. What must it be like, wonders Ruth, to know that you are going to die and to be sure that eternal life awaits?

‘Max ... Martin ... said that you were very good to him.’

Father Hennessey looks meditatively into his coffee cup. ‘Ah, I tried to be but we never know how much harder we could have tried. If I had been more understanding, maybe he wouldn’t have run away. Maybe Elizabeth wouldn’t have died.’

‘Maybe she would have,’ says Ruth gently. ‘Max says she was

often ill as a child.'

Hennessey smiles but says nothing. There is a silence broken only by Bobby in the background having a fierce row with someone called Maggie. Eventually Ruth says, 'You're probably wondering why I asked to see you.'

'I assumed you'd tell me,' says Father Hennessey mildly.

So Ruth tells him about the baby and the two-headed calf, about the writing in blood and the presence lurking outside her house. She probably tells him more than she means to and she attributes this to some innate spooky priest power. Certainly Hennessey's pale blue eyes never leave her face.

'So,' she concludes, 'someone is trying to scare me. Someone linked to the house. And I wondered if you had any idea who that could be.'

She forces herself to confront that blue stare. Father Hennessey looks steadily back at her. 'Do you have any ideas yourself?' he asks.

'No,' says Ruth though, in truth, she does.

'Have you ever met anyone else from the children's home?' asks Hennessey.

'Only Kevin Davies.'

'None of the nuns?'

'No.'

Is he really, as Ted would say, going to pin it on the nuns? But the only person Ruth knows from the Sacred Heart Children's Home is Father Hennessey himself.

'Why do you ask?' says Ruth.

For the first time, Hennessey does not meet her eyes. He looks down at the murky grey liquid in his coffee cup.

'There are other secrets,' he says at last. 'The evil in that house began long before I ever saw it.'

Nelson is actually at Judy's desk when she calls him. He has been looking for the transcript of her interview with Sister Immaculata and is, therefore, surprised and a little spooked to hear that Judy is actually on her way to Southport to see the nun again.

'What are you playing at, Johnson?'

'I think I've discovered something about Sister Immaculata. I think it's important.'

Nelson starts to count to ten and gives up on five. 'When will you be back?'

‘Later tonight.’

He sighs. Judy is a good officer. He trusts her instincts and, God knows, they could do with a breakthrough.

‘No. Stay the night if you have to. I’ll get Tanya to stay at Ruth’s tonight.’

Some routine surveillance will do Tanya good, he thinks. She’s been a bit too pleased with herself lately. He hopes she hasn’t got her eyes on Judy’s job. Tanya is obviously intelligent but she still has a lot to learn. Besides he would never promote a newcomer over a long-standing officer. Nelson believes in precedence; it comes of being the youngest of three.

He continues rifling through Judy’s (incredibly neat) papers and comes across the sheet of paper on which she has jotted down the Spens family tree.

Sir Christopher Spens (d 1981) = Rosemary Spens (d 1957)

↓
Roderick (b 1938) + Annabelle (b 1946, d 1952)

↓
Charlotte + Edward

↓
Tracy + Luke

↓
Sebastian + Flora

He stares at the scribbled names, sure he is missing something. He is so deep in thought that he doesn’t hear his name being called. It is not until Cathbad is actually in the room with him that he registers his presence, purple cloak and all. Tom, the desk sergeant, hovers in the background looking embarrassed.

Since the Saltmarsh case, Nelson and Cathbad have almost become friends. There is an understanding between them, despite Nelson’s contempt for new age philosophy and Cathbad’s dislike for authority. Cathbad has even visited Nelson’s house, bearing dreamcatchers for the girls and Nelson has once or twice met him for a drink in dodgy pubs where the beers all have names and, unless you are careful, people play folk music at you.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ says Tom. ‘He said it was important.’

Nelson notices that, cloak notwithstanding, Cathbad does look

unusually serious, even worried.

‘What it about?’ he asks.

‘Max Grey,’ Cathbad answers.

*

Judy arrives at Southport at just after four to be told that Sister Immaculata is ‘unwell’ and can’t see anyone.

‘It’s important,’ pleads Judy, standing in the spotless reception area surrounded by tropical plants and pictures of saints.

‘I’m sure it is,’ says the Sister sympathetically, ‘but Sister Immaculata is having a bad day. Perhaps she’ll be brighter tomorrow.’

So, after promising to be back tomorrow, Judy finds herself on Southport seafront, tired, hungry, discouraged and slightly scared. What if Nelson is furious with her for disappearing like that? What if Ruth gets murdered tonight and it’s all her fault? What if Tanya finds the dental records, solves the case and gets promoted? She sighs and starts to walk towards the nearest B and B.

*

Ruth had not been pleased to open her door expecting Judy but finding Tanya Fuller, designer glasses flashing, on the doorstep. She likes Judy and had been looking forward to seeing her again. The morning’s conversation with Father Hennessey has left her rather more unsettled than before. What did he mean, ‘The evil in that house began long before I ever saw it.’? ‘Surely you don’t mean the place is haunted?’ Ruth had answered lightly.

‘Maybe I do,’ the priest had replied.

‘But priests don’t believe in ghosts.’

‘Sure we do,’ Hennessey had smiled. ‘What about the Holy Ghost? The most important one of the trilogy as far as I’m concerned.’

All rubbish as far as Ruth is concerned but, driving back along the misty Saltmarsh road, she kept having a ridiculous compulsion to look in her mirror to check that no one was sitting on the back seat. Even now, as she cooks supper for herself and Tanya, she puts on the radio to stop herself wondering if she can hear breathing outside.

Ruth doesn't cook much (although she loves reading cookery books, preferably with pictures of Tuscan olive groves) and she slightly resents cooking for Tanya. It had been all right with Judy but preparing a meal for this stranger sitting on the sofa picking cat's fur off her black trousers, this is different and slightly stressful. Nevertheless Ruth cooks pasta and sauce and mixes a salad. She and Tanya chat in a desultory manner as they eat. Ruth learns that Tanya is twenty five and has been in the police force four years, she is a graduate (sports science) and she thinks keeping fit is a moral imperative. Ruth listens to this in silence, helping herself to an extra piece of garlic bread. Tanya thinks Norfolk is 'very nice', her colleagues are 'very nice' and Nelson is also 'very nice'.

'Don't you find him a bit of a bully?'

'No. He's been very nice to me.'

He's been nice to me too, thinks Ruth, and look where that got me. She looks out of the window and thinks of Nelson and that night, four months ago, when he turned up unexpectedly at her front door. The sun is setting over the marshes and the birds wheel into the air, shifting black clouds against the deep blue sky.

'Beautiful view,' says Tanya politely.

'Yes, isn't it?' says Ruth. She thinks of the Saltmarsh and its secrets: the hidden causeway, the henge, the bodies buried where the land meets the sea. Last year she had nearly died on the marshes. She had thought that the danger was over and that she could live quietly for a while. But somehow danger seems to have found her again.

Tanya eats a tiny amount of pasta, pausing between each mouthful. Ruth has finished her second helping before Tanya has eaten her first. They drink water ('I'm on duty') and Tanya reacts to the offer of pudding as if Ruth had tried to sell her drugs. Ruth eats a slice of chocolate cake and wonders what the hell they are going to talk about all evening. Perhaps they can just watch TV.

She is about to suggest this when, without warning, the lights go out. Tanya jumps up, alert at once.

'It's OK,' says Ruth, 'it's only the fuse. It does that occasionally. The box is out the back.'

The fuse box is in a small outhouse in the back garden. Ruth's neighbours, the weekenders, have converted their outhouse into another bathroom but Ruth's just contains rusty gardening

equipment, a defunct exercise bicycle and the remains of a rotary washing line.

‘I’ll go,’ says Tanya.

‘Don’t be silly. It’s right by the back door. Anyway, you’d never find the box. There’s no light in the shed.’

Ruth puts on her shoes and opens the kitchen door. It is dark outside and a fresh, salty wind is blowing. She steps into the garden, feeling for the side of the shed with one hand. She can feel the flint wall, the rotting wood of the door. She reaches out to touch the handle.

And encounters living flesh.

CHAPTER 27

Ruth screams. She is aware of a smell, lemon and sandal-wood, and then the world goes black. She is fighting for breath; she can't see or feel anything. She falls to the ground, scraping her knee on stone.

'Ruth!' Tanya's voice, muffled but close.

Something is pulled from over Ruth's head and she can see again. The night sky looks extraordinarily bright after the previous total blackness. Ruth is kneeling on the floor by the shed and Tanya is standing beside her, holding a heavy black cloth.

'What happened?' Tanya sounds very shaken. Whether it is concern for Ruth or fear of what Nelson would say if anything happened to her, Ruth doesn't know.

'I came out. I was feeling for the wall and I felt ... a person. Someone was standing there, right by the wall. I touched them. Their face, I think. I heard them breathing. Then it all went black.'

'They threw this over you.' Tanya indicated the black cloth. 'It's weighted at the bottom,' she says.

'That's why I couldn't get it off.' Ruth struggles to her feet. Now that the fear has subsided, she feels rather foolish. There is something infinitely ridiculous about being wrapped in a cloth, like a budgie in a cage.

Tanya pushes open the shed door. 'Is there anyone there?' she calls, her voice admirably steady. No answer but Flint nearly gives them both a heart attack by jumping heavily from the roof, landing with a thump on the grass.

'Let's get you inside,' says Tanya. 'I'll come back out here with a torch.'

But Ruth doesn't want to stay indoors on her own, so she follows Tanya back out into the garden. Tanya flashes her torch around the tiny shed. Its beam illuminates the collection of rusty iron and plastic, the fuse box on the wall, the festoons of cobwebs – but nothing else. She gestures towards the fuse box, all the switches have been pushed down.

'Someone did that deliberately,' she says, 'and look at the doorway. No cobwebs there.'

She shines her torch downwards and there, on the dusty earth floor, between a shovel and the plastic strings of the washing line, is a single footprint.

‘Bingo,’ says Tanya.

Avoiding the print, Tanya switches the power back on and, immediately, light from the house streams into the garden. She spends a few more minutes examining the footprint before saying, ‘OK. Let’s go in. I’ve got to call the boss.’

While Tanya rings Nelson, Ruth feeds Flint who has been meowing loudly for the last five minutes. She can just hear muttered snatches of conversation. ‘No ... just now ... no sign of ... perpetrator escaped ... thorough search ... print ... seems a bit shaken ... no ... yes, sir.’

‘He’s on his way,’ says Tanya as Ruth comes into the sitting room. She sounds nervous. Ruth thinks it must be extremely stressful to work for Nelson. And she could never imagine calling another adult ‘sir’.

Nelson arrives in ten minutes, bringing with him a colleague from forensics. By this time, Tanya and Ruth are sitting in front of the television mindlessly watching a programme called *Your top fifty advertising icons from the 70s*. Ruth’s knee is hurting and she is longing to be in bed. Tanya sits on the edge of the sofa, fiddling with her mobile.

‘Nice to see someone’s got time to watch telly,’ is Nelson’s opening gambit.

‘Yes, we’re just having a nice quiet evening,’ Ruth retorts. She doesn’t feel ready for Nelson’s brusque irony. Tanya, though, blushes.

‘I thought it would calm Ruth down,’ she says, ‘she’s a bit upset.’

‘I’m not the slightest bit upset,’ snaps Ruth.

Nelson strides out into the garden, followed by Tanya and the forensics man. Ruth stays inside. She knows she should be bustling about making tea, being terribly grateful for all this police protection but instead she feels cross and tired and, despite what she said to Tanya, extremely scared. It is one thing to be afraid of the creature in the night, another actually to touch its face, to feel its breath. The danger has come closer, almost to Ruth’s very door and, yes, she is very upset indeed.

Ruth sits on the sofa with Flint on her lap watching as the

Smash aliens fill the TV screen. She has turned the sound off but she can hear their tinny voices in her head, reminding her of cosy evenings spent watching TV with her parents: *Tomorrow's World*, *Man About the House*, *Upstairs Downstairs*. No wonder they put all these nostalgia programmes on the TV, just the thing for sadoes like her. Funny, at the time, she didn't realise that she was living through the golden age of telly; you watched what was on, that was all. There were just the three channels for most of her childhood, no remote control, switching channels meant actually getting up from your seat. They didn't call it 'switching', she remembers, they called it 'turning over'. 'Shall we turn over, Daddy?' her mother would ask when *Top of the Pops* came on. How Ruth had longed to watch *Top of the Pops* with all those sinful transvestites gyrating to the devil's music. Turning over implied only two choices – BBC1 or 2. Ruth's parents had thought that ITV was somehow common – maybe that's why they had watched *I, Claudius*, despite it being so disgusting. Full of sex and violence it may have been, but it was on BBC2 and so somehow safe.

Lying on the table is the black cloth which, only an hour ago, was bundled over her head. Ruth leans closer to examine it, careful not to touch. It is heavy black material, almost oily-looking, and, as Tanya said, it is weighted along the hem, as if it has been specially made to hang down over something.

'Looks like something you'd put over a statue,' says a voice behind her. Nelson has come back in, bringing with him cool air and an almost palpable sense of action, of getting things done. Despite herself, Ruth feels a lot safer when he is in the house.

'What do you mean, over a statue?' she asks.

'You know,' says Nelson, slightly defensively, 'like when they cover the statues in church on Good Friday.'

Ruth thinks of Father Hennessey. *What about the Holy Ghost? The most important one of the trilogy as far as I'm concerned.* 'I'm happy to say I've never been in church on Good Friday,' she says. Not one with statues anyway. Her parents think statues are sinful, evidence of evil Catholic idolatry. Ruth is no fan of Catholicism but she remembers churches in Italy and Spain, rich with incense and mystery, statues and paintings illuminated by hundreds of glowing candles. Idolatry maybe, but a lot more interesting than the empty brick building, rather like a public lavatory, where her

parents get to grips with being Born Again.

‘Or a plinth,’ says Tanya, appearing at Nelson’s side, notebook at the ready.

‘Plinth?’ Nelson sounds impatient.

‘It’s like the cloth they use to cover the plinths at the museum,’ says Tanya.

30th June

Day of Aestas

Two black crows in the garden. My lucky number in the date. An even number of pips in my breakfast grapefruit. When I sacrificed (a blackbird) the head came off sweetly, easily, and the blood ran swiftly into the earth, forming the letter S. S for Sacrifice. A very good omen.

CHAPTER 28

At nine o'clock sharp, full of a Full English Breakfast, Judy Johnson presents herself at the convent. She is told that Sister Immaculata is feeling slightly better and that she can see Judy in fifteen minutes 'when we've tidied her up a bit'. Dreading to think what this entails, Judy sits down to wait in the reception area, beside a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary, eyes rolling ecstatically up to heaven.

'Good morning, Miss Johnson.' It is the Sister, all starched veil and professional kindness.

'Detective Constable Johnson,' says Judy.

'I beg your pardon.' Titles are important, thinks Judy. The Sister would lose all her authority if addressed as Miss Whatever, would become just another middle-aged woman in a funny outfit. But as Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart she has power, albeit of a rather specialised kind.

'Sister?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder ... could you tell me ... what is wrong with Sister Immaculata?'

'Wrong?' The Sister raises her eyebrows. 'She has cancer, Detective Constable Johnson. Inoperable. She has months, maybe weeks, to live.'

This time, Judy interviews Sister Immaculata in a conservatory overlooking a windswept rock garden. The nun is perceptibly weaker, her breath rattling in her chest, her hands shaking. Only her eyes remain alert – they regard Judy with suspicion, even, perhaps, fear.

'Detective Constable Judy Johnson,' Judy introduces herself. 'Do you remember me?'

'Of course I do. I'm not daft, you know.' Judy is rather relieved to hear the aggression in the old woman's voice. It will make her task easier.

'Sister Immaculata, your real name is Orla McKinley. Is that right?'

A pause. 'Depends what you mean by "real".'

'Your baptismal name.'

‘Yes. What of it?’

‘In 1951 you were living with the Spens family on Woolmarket Street.’

Another, longer pause. Sister Immaculata twists the ever-present rosary tightly around her hand. In the rock garden two seagulls fight over a crust of bread.

‘I was working there as a nanny,’ Sister Immaculata says at last.

‘Annabelle Spens’ nanny?’

‘Yes.’

‘Annabelle died in 1952, didn’t she?’

Sister Immaculata looks at her but says nothing. The rosary beads are still.

‘Did you stay on after Annabelle died?’

‘Yes. They were kind. They let me stay.’

‘Did you look after Roderick?’

‘Roderick was fourteen. Hardly a child.’

‘Sister Immaculata ...’ Judy leans forward. She knows everything depends on getting this old, dying woman to speak to her. She puts all her persuasive powers into her next words, even offering up a prayer for good measure. Please God, let her tell me the truth. ‘Sister Immaculata, we found a little girl’s body buried under the front door. I need you to tell me, is there any way that the body could be Annabelle’s? Please. It’s very important.’

At first she thinks that she has failed. Sister Immaculata says nothing and the rosary beads start to move between her fingers. But then, with a sound halfway between a sigh and a sob, the words start to pour out.

‘It was wrong. It was evil. I knew that but I loved him, you see. Strange what a poor excuse that sounds, but I loved him. At the time, that was everything. I covered up for him. I knew it was a sin. A black sin. I’ve tried to atone but the sin catches you up in the end.’

‘Sister,’ Judy presses her hand, ‘what sin? What did you cover up?’

Sister Immaculata looks at her and now her eyes are awash with tears. ‘He killed her,’ she says, ‘and I covered up for him.’ Nelson is not having a good day. His computer has gone Trappist again, Clough has disappeared for a late breakfast or early lunch and Tanya is nowhere to be seen. He wishes Judy were here. She has one outstandingly good quality as a police officer – she is

always where you want her to be. Except now, of course, when she's in bloody Southport. As a child, Nelson once spent a holiday in Southport. Long, wet walks along the seafront, a B and B where you got one slice of toast for breakfast and weren't allowed to touch any of the thousands of knick-knacks grinning evilly from the shelves. Never again.

He's also tired. He didn't leave Ruth's until past midnight. She'd seemed all right, shaken obviously but still feisty. It's one of the things he really likes about Ruth. She's tough. Some people would have been hysterical last night because, let's face it, someone had come right up to her house, intending to kidnap her, assault her or worse. But Ruth had been her usual, defiant self. She'd been quite acerbic when Tanya had (tactlessly) suggested that she was upset. Tanya is never in a million years going to understand someone like Ruth Galloway. He's not sure he understands her either but he does admire her. Admire her? queries a weaselly voice in his head. Is that all? Nelson stamps firmly on any thoughts about his feelings for Ruth. He's already had to put up with the sight of Michelle sorting out piles of Rebecca's old baby things to give to Ruth. He doesn't need any more complications, thank you very much.

'Sir?'

Tanya's head appears around his office door. He tries to discourage the rest of her from joining it.

'What is it?'

'I've found Annabelle Spens' dental records.'

This is different. His tiredness vanishes and rearranges his face into something more welcoming.

'Good work, Tanya. Show me.'

Praise makes Tanya expansive. 'Well, it was really you saying about there being some fancy dental work done. I thought, maybe they didn't get it done locally. So I contacted the London School of Dentistry. They've been around since 1911, used to be at the London Hospital but it's now part of St Bartholomew's. Anyway, they had her records. They faxed them over a few minutes ago.'

She pauses for praise but Nelson just holds out his hand for the records. He scans the pages, frowning, then looks up.

'It's not her.'

'What?'

'Did you look at the records?'

‘No ... I just brought them straight to you.’

‘Well, you remember our skull has a filling. Unusual in such a young child. According to this, Annabelle Spens didn’t have a filling in her head.’

Ruth is on her way to meet Cathbad. He rang yesterday and suggested meeting at the Roman site and having lunch at the Phoenix. Now, Ruth considers that Cathbad will provide the perfect antidote to the darkness of the last few days. Cathbad may talk about being open to the ‘dark side’ but there is, in fact, something curiously comforting about him. Also Max has told her that they have unearthed a carving which could be a ‘Janus Stone’, a depiction of the old two-faced God himself. She looks forward to introducing Cathbad to Janus.

Ruth drives fast, listening to one of her more cheerful Bruce Springsteen tapes. None of that ‘Badlands’ stuff, the highway travelling to nowhere, the dead-end towns with no jobs ‘on account of the economy’. This is the ‘Dancing in the Dark’ years, unsubtle guitar riffs and souring sax solos. Ruth is tired (she didn’t get to bed until one and then hardly slept) but she is happy that the thought of a genuine Roman find can lift her spirits and help her forget that someone is trying to kill her.

Well, not forget exactly, she looks about her as she gets out of the car and she jumps when a skylark rises vertically out of the undergrowth, its song spiralling into the sky. She also keeps one hand on her mobile phone. Nelson is on speed dial – the first sign of anything lurking in the bushes and she’ll be onto him. But, in the daylight, it’s hard to believe in murdered children, sacrificial offerings or the cult of the witch-goddess.

It starts to rain as she climbs the grass bank; fine, warm rain that is refreshing rather than otherwise. The site is deserted, the trenches neatly covered with tarpaulins. There is no sign of Cathbad. Max had said that she would find the Janus Stone in the far trench. As she sets out across the uneven ground, the rain gets heavier and she wishes she had brought a coat. Lifting up the wet tarpaulin, Ruth sees the stone immediately. It is a round piece of what looks like granite, about twice the size of a human head. It looks misshapen and sinister lying there on the meticulously raked earth. Was it from a statue or did it have some other function? Even from where she stands she can see that both sides of the stone have a face, neither of them particularly friendly.

‘Janus,’ says a voice above her. ‘Janus. The guardian of the doorway.’

CHAPTER 29

Judy hardly dares to breath. She knows it is vital that Sister Immaculata goes on speaking so she prays that no one else comes into the conservatory, that no well-meaning soul offers them tea or coffee, that the elderly nun doesn't become too weak to continue.

'Who killed her?' she prompts gently.

But when Sister Immaculata turns to look at her, Judy sees that the old woman is no longer there. The eyes, full of anguish and brimming with tears, are the eyes of Orla McKinley.

'I was only twenty-three,' she says. 'He called me his Jocasta. I was twenty when the baby was born. Too young. I didn't know. I was only an ignorant girl from County Clare. He was so much cleverer. He knew all about history, about Ancient Rome. About the gods. About the terrible things you had to do to placate them.'

'The baby,' prompts Judy, a cold hand starting to close around her heart.

'My baby,' says Sister Immaculata, her face shining now with some remembered light. 'My Bernadette.'

'You had a baby?'

'A little girl. I had her for three years. And then he killed her. He said the gods demanded it.'

The cold has now spread through Judy's entire body.

'Christopher Spens killed your baby?' she whispers.

Sister Immaculata does not seem to hear. 'He said that the gods needed a sacrifice. We had to make the walls safe again. Annabelle had died, he said, because the walls weren't safe. We had to offer the gods something precious. That's why he killed her, he said.'

'So he killed your baby *as a sacrifice*?'

'It was his baby too,' says Sister Immaculata sadly, 'that didn't seem to make a difference though.'

'It was his baby too,' echoes Judy.

'I knew it was wrong.' Sister Immaculata grasps Judy's hand. 'I knew it was wrong. A sin. And sin catches up with you, doesn't it? That's what the sisters used to say, back home in Ireland.'

Well, I sinned. With him. And I got pregnant and had the baby. Born in sorrow, that's what they say. A bastard. Well, she paid the price, didn't she? My Bernadette.'

'How did he kill her?' Judy knows she must get the whole story. She'll have to come back and take a proper statement but somehow she knows that this chance might not come again. Sister Immaculata has kept her secret for over fifty years and now she is choosing to talk. She mustn't stop now.

'I was washing clothes in the laundry,' says the nun wearily, 'the maids had the morning off. When I went to check on her she was dead. Stabbed in her cot. There was blood over the walls, the covers, the floor – everywhere. He wanted me to put my hands in her blood. It was part of the ritual, he said.'

'What did you do?' asks Judy in horror.

'I covered up for him,' says Sister Immaculata sharply, 'didn't I tell you?'

'How?'

'I disappeared. He buried the body in the garden. Said he would dig her up later and put her under the door. An offering to Janus. The head would go in the well, he said. I left. I left that day, went back to Ireland. Everyone thought I'd taken Bernadette with me. That crazy unreliable Irish girl, they would have said. I did it to protect him.'

'But why?' Judy almost wails.

The nun looks at her with a curious expression, almost of pity, on her face. 'I still loved him, you see. That was the worst thing. He'd killed my baby and I still loved him. I think now that was the biggest sin of all.'

'So you went back to Ireland?'

'I went back and I became a nun. What else can you do when you've committed a mortal sin? Then, years later, Father Hennessey came to the convent. He was looking for sisters to work in his children's home. When he told me where it was, I knew. God had sent him. It was my chance to be near Bernadette again. I used to talk to her. At night. I used to walk in the grounds and talk to her. They were the happiest years of my life.'

'Did Father Hennessey know?'

'Oh no. He suspected. Not about Bernadette but he knew I had a secret. He tried to get me to tell him. The truth will set you free, he used to say. Free! I'll never be free.'

As she says the last words, her head slumps forwards on her chest.

‘Sister Immaculata?’ Judy bends over the huddled figure. She is still breathing, harsh uneven breaths, but her eyes are closed.

Instantly the Sister is at their side.

‘You’d better go now,’ she says to Judy.

Outside, on the seafront, Judy takes great gulps of salty air. It is as if she can feel the nun’s painful struggle for breath inside her own lungs. She shakes her head, wanting to rid it of the image of the baby, the blood-soaked cradle, the terrified mother, the crazed father, the knife gleaming in his hand ...

She forces herself to think logically, to switch off the horror film now running on a continuous loop in her brain (she can even smell the house – lavender polish and lilies and the sour undercurrent of blood). She is a police officer and she has a job to do. Judy shelters in the porch of one of the Gothic hotels to ring Nelson. It is raining and a sharp sea wind is blowing along the deserted promenade. Typical English summer weather.

He answers on the first ring and she tells the story as unemotionally as she can.

‘Jesus.’ She can hear Nelson’s sharp intake of breath and knows that he, too, is not unaffected. Not that he would ever show it, of course.

‘Christopher Spens got the nanny pregnant and then killed her baby as an offering to the gods?’

‘That’s what she said, sir.’

‘Do you believe her?’

‘Yes.’

Another pause and then Nelson says slowly, ‘That would explain why the body under the doorway shared DNA with Roderick Spens. They did share a common male ancestor – they both had the same father, Christopher Spens.’

‘Do you want me to come back, sir?’

‘No. Stay where you are. I’ll come up tomorrow and we’ll take a proper statement. She’s unwell, you say?’

‘She’s dying.’

‘We’d better be quick then,’ says Nelson callously. ‘You stay in Southport another night. Enjoy yourself.’

This last, thinks Judy, as she walks along the promenade in the rain, might prove a tough assignment.

Nelson puts down the phone. Judy's story is almost unbelievable and yet he does believe it. As soon as he saw the little body, arranged so carefully amidst the stones and the rubble, he had known that something evil was afoot. Whether the child was Elizabeth Black, Annabelle Spens or Bernadette McKinley, something terrible had happened to that little girl and the memory of it still haunted that house, hung in the air around the swing and the wishing well, clung to the wallpaper, was imprinted in the black and white tiles. All traces of the house may now have vanished but Nelson knows one thing; he would not live in one of Edward Spens' luxury apartments for a million pounds.

He jumps when his phone rings again. An impatient voice, a woman, educated and possibly Asian.

'This is Doctor Sita Patel.'

'Who?' Nelson's mind is blank.

'You rang me. About Sir Roderick Spens.'

'Oh yes.' This is what Nelson had promised Whitcliffe. That he would check with Sir Roderick's GP about his state of health, ask whether being involved in a police investigation, however peripherally, would upset his delicate mental balance (Whitcliffe's words).

Nelson explains as best he can. There is a silence at the other end of the phone.

'I don't understand,' says Doctor Patel crisply, 'Sir Roderick Spens does not have Alzheimer's.'

'He doesn't?'

'His mind is remarkably sharp. Sharper than yours or mine I daresay, Detective Chief Inspector.'

Nelson clicks off his phone, thinking hard.

'Interesting God, Janus.'

'So I understand.' Ruth looks up from the mosaic.

'A minor deity, of course. Like Nemesis, Morpheus and Hecate.'

'The minor deities all seem to be baddies,' says Ruth lightly.

'You could say that.'

Judy's options for the afternoon seem to be: amusement arcade, shopping centre, an endless cream tea at one of the endless hotels or going back to the B and B to stare at the wallpaper (pink with green trelliswork). In the end, she decides to go to the cinema. Inside one of those multiplexes, you could be anywhere. The

same worn purple carpet, the same smell of popcorn, the same posters, the same Pick 'n' Mix with what look like the same fingerprints on the chocolate Brazils.

She hasn't been to the pictures for ages. She and Darren like such different films, she usually waits until things are out on DVD. But a film is just what she needs to stop the slideshow in her head, to rid her mind of Sister Immaculata's words: *There was blood over the walls, the covers, the floor – everywhere. He wanted me to put my hands in her blood.*

The foyer is deserted and Judy dithers for ages between a thriller and a girl-fest about bridesmaids. In the end she opts for the thriller. She has been going out with Darren since they were both seventeen and he has started to make noises about marriage. Judy, to her own surprise, finds herself violently opposed. The idea of prancing down the aisle in a huge white dress seems alien, offensive and, above all, *embarrassing*. Judy hates being the centre of attention. It's one of the things that makes her a good detective.

There are only four people in the cinema. An elderly couple, a single man who looks so like a pervert that he could be an undercover policeman – and Judy. She sits near the back, eating Revels and feeling rather guilty. Going to the cinema is no way for a person of working age to spend the afternoon. But, in the cinema, there is no afternoon. Just as you could be anywhere, it could be anytime. She knows that when she leaves the light will hit her like a blow. It is always dark in multiplex world.

The thriller is quite entertaining though she had forgotten that Americans mumble so much. She wants to lean forward like an old lady with an ear trumpet, 'What did you say, young man?' And the music is loud enough to pin her back against her seat. It has been a long time since she has been to a club or anywhere that plays loud music. She is used to the gentle murmur of her iPod. She really must get out more.

Gradually, though, she starts to get into the plot which involves the FBI, a conspiracy to kill the president and, rather inexplicably, aliens. She is just drifting into zombie-like enjoyment when one of the characters mumbles something about 'my kid sister, Jocasta'.

Jocasta.

What is it about that name that rings alarm bells in Judy's

mind? Ignoring the on-screen attempts to blow up the Empire State Building (the genre is post-9/11 apocalypse), she runs the last few hours through her internal scanner. Judy has an excellent memory – another reason why bloody Nelson should promote her. Jocasta ... Jocasta. There. She has it.

I was only twenty-three. He called me his Jocasta.

The next minute, Judy is stumbling out of the cinema, oblivious to the fact that she will now never know whether Todd, Brad and Shannon manage to save the planet. In the foyer, she sits on the dusty, popcorn-strewn steps and rummages for her BlackBerry. She keys Jocasta into the search engine and there it is: ‘Jocasta was a famed queen of Thebes. She was the wife of Laius, mother and later wife of Oedipus ...’

Mother and later wife of Oedipus.

Oedipus had inadvertently married his mother, hence the complex. Why would Sir Christopher, a much older man, call Orla ‘his Jocasta’? Judy scans further back in her memory, to the Spens family tree that she had scribbled in her notebook.

Roderick: born 1938. If Orla/Sister Immaculata is seventy five now, she must have been born in 1933. When the baby died, she was twenty-three. Roderick would have been eighteen. *He called me his Jocasta.*

Judy dials Nelson’s number.

But Nelson ignores the call. He is staring at a six-word text message: *I’m going to kill your daughter.*

30th June

Day of Aestas

I got my knife and went indoors. All was quiet. The mother was washing clothes in the laundry, the maids had the morning off. I went into her room. The blinds were drawn and the light was pinkish, like the light on the inside of your eyelids.

Her eyes are blue, like mine. I've never noticed that before. Her lips move as if she's about to say something. She doesn't say much (another sign of her backwardness) but it looks as if she's about to say something now. I decide I'd better speak first.

'Hallo,' I say.

'Lo,' she replies.

CHAPTER 30

Nelson is running, faster than he has ever run in his life. Twice in his police career his life has been in danger and, even at the time, he'd been quite pleased at how he'd handled this. The knowledge that he might have been about to die had sharpened his reactions, made them cold and precise. He had not been scared so much as angry and determined not to let the perpetrators get away with it. But this, this is something else altogether. His heart is leaping in his chest, huge shuddering movements that make him feel sick and dizzy. He lurches as he runs, coordination shot, breath coming in shallow, painful spasms. His daughter. Someone is going to hurt one of his daughters. It is as if they have already cut out his heart.

He reaches his car and looks at his watch. Three thirty. Think. Focus. He forces himself to take deeper breaths, gripping the steering wheel. Like this, he is no good to anyone. Where should Laura and Rebecca be at three thirty? Just leaving school. If he hurries, he can be there in five minutes.

If he hurries ... Nelson leaves a trail of bemused and terrified road users behind him as he drives, mostly on the wrong side of the road, to the girls' school on the outskirts of King's Lynn. The siren is blaring and he barely slows down for anything, red lights, junctions, pedestrians, anything. Finally, he screeches to a halt beside the school, mounting the kerb, scraping the side of the car against the wall.

The rain has stopped and teenage girls are pouring out of the school gates, all wearing purple sweatshirts and short black skirts. His heart leaps every time he sees a girl with long brown hair but there are so many of them, so many slim girls with minuscule skirts and long, wavy hair, but not one of them is his. His heart pounds harder than ever and he can hear himself making a moaning sound under his breath, almost a whimper. Please God, he prays madly to the God whom he has ignored for most of his adult life, please God make them be all right.

And then, in a knot of purple sweatshirts, he sees Paige, Rebecca's best friend, ambling along without a care in the world, chatting to a plump girl with hair dyed a virulent pink.

‘Paige!’ Nelson’s bellow makes every head turn in his direction. ‘Paige!’

He races up to her, grabbing her arm. He is aware how mad he must look. Rebecca’s nice, respectable father, a policeman, who is popular amongst the girls for his bad karaoke turns and his willingness to offer lifts, turning into this raving lunatic with staring eyes and trembling hands.

‘Paige! Where’s Rebecca?’

Paige backs away, staring. She seems incapable of speech. Her mouth hangs open and he can see the gum inside it. He is suddenly filled with a murderous rage that this girl, this imbecile, should be safe while his darling daughters are in danger.

‘Where’s Rebecca?’ he repeats, trying to make his voice calmer.

‘I dunno. She’s got an after-school club, I think ...’ She is still backing away, her eyes round. Nelson closes his eyes, trying to still the demons inside him. Unexpectedly, the pink-haired girl comes to his aid.

‘Drama club,’ she says brightly. ‘They’re doing *Fiddler on the Roof*. Room C9, Block 3.’

Nelson is running again before she has finished speaking. Sliding over the wet turf of the playing field, scattering a game of hockey (‘Look out!’), crashing through the main doors to Block 3. Christ, why do schools have so many doors? He runs through endless corridors, door after door banging behind him. He shouts ‘Rebecca!’ and the sound bounces off the glass and plasterboard and a photo-montage of ‘School Journey 2007’. Room C9, the girl had said. Maddeningly, the rooms do not seem to be in any order: A12, B1, B7, D15. He stops and starts to double back, heart pounding harder than ever. He grabs a passing arm, ‘C9,’ he pants. The owner of the arm, a middle-aged man, looks uneasy.

‘Who are you?’

‘Rebecca Nelson’s father. *Where is she?*’

And then, behind the man’s corduroy back, he sees a door miraculously labelled ‘C9’. Thrusting the man to one side, he launches himself through it.

The large room contains a makeshift stage, a hassled-looking teacher, a few gum-chewing girls and, wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, his daughter. Ignoring everyone, Nelson enfolds the outraged Rebecca in a fierce hug.

‘Thank God. Thank God.’

‘Dad! Get off!’

‘Rebecca,’ he holds her at arm’s length, ‘where’s Laura? Where’s your sister?’ If anything happens to Laura, he will always feel guilty that he came to find Rebecca first.

‘I’ve got no idea. Dad! Let me go! What are you playing at?’

‘We’re going home.’

‘I don’t want to go home. I’m playing Tzeitel.’

‘Come on.’

Without letting go of Rebecca’s arm, he shouts ‘Sorry’ to the now frankly terrified teacher and propels them both out of the room.

In the corridor, he stabs Laura’s number into his phone. Straight through to answerphone. He tries again, hardly noticing the four missed calls from Judy Johnson. He looks at his watch. Four o’clock. Michelle won’t be home before six. Where is Laura? His darling eldest daughter, so correct and well-behaved always (like one of the girls in *Little Women*, Michelle used to say). Where can she be?

‘Does Laura go to any clubs on a Thursday?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Keep ringing her,’ Nelson thrusts his phone into Rebecca’s hand, ‘we’re going home.’

Ignoring Rebecca’s litany of complaints, threats and slurs on his parenting (he’s had plenty of practice), Nelson drags her back through the school and across the now deserted playing field to the place where his car is rammed up against the wall.

‘Dad! Your car!’ For the first time, Rebecca sounds shocked.

‘Keep phoning.’

Laura will have gone home. It’s not unlike her to get home first, put the kettle on and cook supper for everyone. An angel, that’s what she is. Nelson’s eyes are wet when he thinks what an angel his eldest daughter is. Rebecca has always been the rebellious one and, besides, Rebecca is sitting beside him, safe and sound, so he doesn’t need to sanctify her. But Laura, Laura is out there somewhere with a madman on her trail. Perhaps he has already found her, perhaps he has ... Nelson rams his foot down on the accelerator.

‘Dad! Are you trying to kill us?’

‘Keep phoning.’

He takes the turn into the drive on two wheels. Michelle’s car

isn't there but then he wouldn't expect her to be home yet. Will she kill him for not phoning her first? No, Michelle would want him to do what he is doing – save their daughters' lives.

'Laura!' yells Nelson, bursting in through the front door.

A silence during which Nelson thinks that he can hear his heart breaking. And then, a faint noise, like a rat scrabbling, directly overhead.

'Laura?' Nelson starts to climb the stairs.

'Dad! Don't!' Rebecca grabs his arm. He looks at her, uncomprehending. He tries to shake Rebecca off and, as he does so, notices two things: Laura's flowery backpack lying beside the front door and a pair of man-size trainers next to it.

'Dad?'

And there is Laura at the top of the stairs. Not dead but gloriously alive, wearing a dressing gown tightly belted around her waist.

'Laura! Sweetheart!' He bounds upstairs to hug her. She's safe. Thank God, she's safe. Thank you God. I'll go to mass next Sunday. She's alive. They're both alive ... A dressing gown?

He loosens his grip, takes in Laura's dishevelled appearance, Rebecca's attempts to make herself invisible, the scuffling sounds still emanating from one of the upstairs rooms. Quick as thought, he kicks open the door to Laura's bedroom.

And finds a youth, half-dressed, trying to climb out of the window.

CHAPTER 31

It takes about a second for Nelson to revert from distraught father to aggressive policeman. He slams the window shut and addresses the cringing boy, 'Get your clothes on, sunshine, and get out of my house. If I ever see you here again, I'll lock you up.'

At the foot of the stairs, Rebecca and Laura are staring up at him, clinging together for support.

'Did you know?' he asks Rebecca. 'Did you know what she was doing?'

'No. Honestly!'

He knows she is lying but there is no time to do anything about that now. He is already phoning Sergeant Clough. 'Cloughie. Someone's threatening my girls. I need some protection over here right now.' Glancing at his phone, he sees there are now six missed calls from Judy.

'Get in the sitting room,' he tells the girls.

'I want to get dressed,' says Laura.

Nelson experiences a spasm of – what? Revulsion, anger, sadness? His daughter, his angel, was about to have sex with that gangling idiot upstairs. He hears the front door slam. At least he is gone, maybe he won't come back. Maybe he was just in time to save his daughter's virginity. And then he thinks: who am I kidding? Of course he wasn't in time; he is months, perhaps years, too late.

'Who was he?' he asks.

'His name's Lee,' says Laura sulkily. 'Mum's met him,' she adds, as if this makes it all right.

A fresh horror strikes Nelson's heart. 'Does your mother know ...?'

'No!' Laura's shocked response somehow reassures him. At least Laura has had the decency to hide her sex life from her parents. At least Michelle isn't colluding with her daughters behind his back.

'I want you both to stay downstairs,' he says.

It is gradually beginning to dawn on Rebecca that there is more to her father's behaviour than the usual parental paranoia.

'Dad,' she says, 'what's going on?'

‘Nothing,’ Nelson starts to dial Judy’s number.

‘You said someone was threatening us.’

‘Just some nutter,’ says Nelson, trying to sound reassuring.

‘There’s nothing to worry about, I promise you.’

Both the girls now look completely terrified. They huddle together on the sofa and Rebecca automatically switches on the TV. Nelson is about to shout at her to turn it off but then he thinks that maybe they could do with the soothing mindlessness of MTV or *Hollyoaks*. Certainly, Laura and Rebecca both relax slightly when the screen is filled with loud Americans exchanging complicated handshakes.

Then the doorbell rings and they both scream.

‘It’s only Cloughie,’ says Nelson. ‘Stay here!’ he barks, slightly ruining the calming effect.

But it isn’t Clough. It’s Cathbad. He is wearing what Nelson calls his ‘semi-Druid’ costume; jeans and T-shirt covered by a tattered purple cloak. But his expression as he grasps Nelson’s arm is devoid of any play-acting. He looks in deadly earnest.

‘Nelson. I think something’s happened to Ruth.’

*

Judy presses ‘redial’ again and again as she runs through the rainswept Southport streets. Why the hell isn’t Nelson answering his phone? Passing pensioners and glum-looking tourists turn to stare as she races past them. Probably no one has moved that fast in Southport for the last fifty years. When she arrives at the convent, she is wild-haired and out of breath, still punching redial with one finger.

‘Can ... I ... see ... Sister Immaculata please?’

‘I’m sorry, it’s out of the question.’ The nun at the door looks faintly accusing. ‘She’s had a very bad turn. The doctor’s with her now.’

‘I’ll wait,’ pants Judy.

‘She won’t be seeing anyone else today.’

At first Nelson hardly takes in what Cathbad is saying. Then, slowly, the wheels turn in his head and his whole body is suddenly icy cold. Ruth ... his daughter. I’m going to kill your daughter. Could whoever sent this message possibly know that Ruth is carrying his daughter inside her? He goes so pale that

Cathbad looks concerned.

‘Are you all right?’

‘What’s happened to Ruth?’

‘We were meant to meet at the Swaffham site. But when I got there there was no sign of her. And I found this in one of the trenches.’

He holds out Ruth’s phone.

‘You’d better come in,’ says Nelson.

The girls hardly look up as the cloaked figure passes through the sitting room. They are deeply involved in some rubbish involving American high school pupils, loud rock music and vampires. Nelson and Cathbad talk in the kitchen, amongst Michelle’s gleaming work surfaces and the cork-board groaning with invitations, shopping lists and school timetables. It seems almost impossible that evil should come here, into this sunny family room, but they both know that it has; they both feel its shadow.

‘I went to her cottage,’ Cathbad is saying. ‘It’s completely deserted.’

‘The university?’

‘No one there. Her office is locked.’

Nelson picks up Ruth’s phone. His was the last number she dialled. He looks at his own phone, six missed calls from Judy Johnson and, before that, one from Ruth Galloway.

It is a shock when his phone rings again. Judy Johnson.

‘Johnson. What is it?’

‘Roderick Spens sir. I think he was the father.’

‘What?’

‘Sister Immaculata. I thought the baby was Sir Christopher’s but now I think it was Roderick’s. He would have been about fourteen or fifteen when it was conceived. Sister Immaculata, Orla, would have been twenty.’

‘She had an affair with a fourteen-year-old?’

‘I think so. Sister Immaculata said he called her his Jocasta. Jocasta was the mother of Oedipus.’

‘Classical scholar, are you now?’

‘I looked it up.’

‘Have you confronted this Sister Immaculata?’

‘She’s too ill to speak to me.’

Nelson remembers Dr Patel saying that Sir Roderick’s mind was

‘remarkably sharp’. He remembers that, when Ruth texted to say that she was expecting a girl and he had rung her back, Sir Roderick had actually been in his office, dithering about and pretending to be a sweet little old man.

‘Are you still there, sir?’

‘Yes. Good work, Judy. Keep trying to see the nun. I’ll call you later.’

He clicks off the phone. Cathbad leans forward and Nelson sees not the fey Druid but the scientist, the man who would, incredibly enough, have made rather a good policeman.

‘Nelson,’ he says. ‘I think Max Grey has kidnapped Ruth.’

30th June

Day of Aestas

I hadn't expected this. Socrates may favour dialogue but I don't. The last thing I needed was a chat with the infant. Apart from anything else, my time was limited. The maids would be back at midday and the mother could come in at any moment.

Then I had a brainwave. 'Keep quiet,' I said, 'I've got a surprise for you.'

I bent over the bed. I had hoped she was asleep but she wasn't. Her eyes were open and she looked at me.

She obeyed my order, even putting her finger to her lips. I'm obviously born to command. In fact, I think I've got quite a gift with children.

'Lie still,' I said. And I pulled the knife out of my pocket.

I raised the knife. She laughed. Sacrilege! I lowered the knife slightly and looked at her. Then she started to cry.

CHAPTER 32

When Ruth opens her eyes it is still dark. She is not scared at first. Instead she feels rather sleepy, soothing memories rocking to and fro in her head: picnicking with her mother and brother in Castle Wood, listening to the radio with her dad, floating in the sea, hair streaming back amongst the seaweed, sleeping on a beach in the sun. Even when she realises that she is, in fact, lying tied up on a narrow bed, she is not immediately filled with terror. The pleasant memories persist along with the gentle rocking motion. Then, as if in an effort to rouse her, the baby in her womb kicks. Ruth is suddenly wide awake, struggling to sit upright. Her hands are tied behind her back so this is a difficult feat, but she manages it. By her head there is a small round window but through it she can see only grey and green, merging and separating like colours in a kaleidoscope. The whole thing is so horribly like a dream that she actually closes her eyes again and wills herself to wake up. But when she opens her eyes it is all still there, the rope (now digging painfully into her wrists), the window onto nothingness, the strange seesawing movement.

Desperately she tries to remember what has happened. She was in the trench, looking at the Janus Stone. She can see the two stone faces looking up at her, sinister and impassive. Then someone spoke to her. Who was it? She remembers that she wasn't scared, just curious and slightly annoyed at the interruption. She remembers getting out of the trench and going to look at something in a car. Then something must have frightened her because she tried to ring Nelson. After that – nothing.

'Ah. You've woken up.'

Ruth turns and sees what should have been clear all along. She is in a boat, very like Max's boat. Hang on, it *is* Max's boat. She can see the stuffed dog, Elizabeth's dog, grinning at her from the bed. She is lying on the galley seat. The sink and cooker where once Max cooked her a gourmet meal, are opposite her. The herbs are still swinging picturesquely from the ceiling. And, standing on the step leading down from the deck, is Sir Roderick Spens. What's he doing here?

‘Can you help me?’ she says. ‘I’m tied up.’

Inexplicably Roderick lets out a high-pitched giggle. ‘Tied up? So you are. Dr Galloway’s busy. She’s tied up.’

Ruth does not know what is happening but she knows that she is suddenly very scared. And Roderick’s face, so mild-looking with its faded blue eyes and fringe of white hair, is the scariest thing of all.

‘Let me go,’ she says, trying to sound authoritative.

‘Oh I can’t let you go,’ says Roderick, still sounding gently amused. ‘You have what I want, you see?’

‘What?’

‘You have Detective Inspector Harry Nelson’s baby. You lay with him and now you’re with child. You’re carrying his daughter. That’s what I want.’

Ruth stares, cold with horror. The archaic language ‘lay with him ... with child’ only serves to heighten the horror. Somehow this old man knows her secret, that she is carrying Nelson’s baby, and he is going to use this knowledge in some terrible way.

Still smiling, Sir Roderick approaches and Ruth sees the dull gleam of a knife.

‘I want the baby,’ he repeats.

*

Nelson stares at Cathbad.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Max Grey. I think he’s got something to do with Ruth disappearing.’

When Cathbad appeared in Nelson’s office (was it only yesterday?), he had had some actual information about Max to go with his sixth sense. Apparently Cathbad had been speaking to a fellow Druid who lives in Ireland. ‘He knew Max Grey from a long way back, when he lived in Ireland. He described him in detail. Only he called himself by a different name entirely. And Pendragon—’

‘Who?’ Nelson had asked, wincing as if in pain.

‘Pendragon. My friend. He said that this Max Grey character was a real troubled soul. Full of inner violence.’

Whilst admiring the Druid networking system, Nelson had, at the time, dismissed this as mere new age fancy. But now he says

with real urgency in his voice, 'Why do you think he's involved?'

'Today, when I couldn't find Ruth, I rang him. No answer. I contacted his students. He hasn't been seen all day.'

'Where does he live?'

'On a boat, apparently. Moored near Reedham.'

'Come on then.' Nelson reaches for his phone. 'Let's pay him a visit.'

*

Ruth screams, so loudly that it startles both of them. Roderick stops and looks at her quizzically.

'Why are you frightened?' he asks.

'Why do you think?' shouts Ruth. 'I'm stuck here on a boat with a madman. A madman with a knife.'

Roderick looks quite hurt. 'I'm not mad,' he says. 'I've got a first in classics from Cambridge.'

From what Ruth has seen of Oxbridge graduates, the two are not mutually exclusive. But she knows that her best hope is in getting Roderick to speak to her. She tries to make her voice calm and reasonable, as if she is having a cosy chat with another academic.

'I did archaeology at UCL,' she says. 'They've got a good classics department.'

'University College London,' muses Roderick. 'A very respectable university. You must be a clever girl.'

Ruth attempts a simper. 'Are you a classicist?' she asks, trying to sound suitably admiring.

'I am a Roman.' His eyes are glittering. Cataracts or madness? At least he sits down on a small stool opposite Ruth, and lowers the knife. 'I realised that at an early age. I was born at the wrong time. I belong in the age of discipline and self-reliance, of sacrifice and the pure libation of blood. Of the old gods.'

The old gods. Ruth thinks of the body buried under the door, the head in the well, the black cockerel. She remembers the feeling that the house on Woolmarket Street belongs to an older, darker, time.

'Of course,' Sir Roderick is saying, 'I don't do much these days. I belong to the historical society and, of course, I'm a trustee of the museum.'

The museum. Alarm bells go off in Ruth's head and in quick succession she sees the model baby, the two-headed calf and the black drapery that was thrown over her head. In the same moment, she recognises the smell, lemon and sandalwood. The scent that emanates discreetly from Sir Roderick Spens.

'My father was a great classicist,' Roderick goes on, 'Christopher Spens. Have you heard of him?'

Something tells Ruth that she had better say yes.

'He was a great man. A great headmaster. Wrote many books about Ancient Rome. But he never got the recognition he deserved. He died a broken man. Never got over my sister's death.'

'Your sister died?' Ruth remembers Nelson saying something about Annabelle Spens. Could Roderick's sister be the child buried under the door?

'Of scarlet fever, yes. Nothing was ever right again. My mother stayed in her room all day crying. My father spent every hour at the school, never seemed to want to come home. He knew the house was cursed, you see. That's why I had to kill the other baby, you see. To lift the curse.'

Ruth's whole body is suddenly stone cold. 'What baby?' she whispers.

'My baby,' says Roderick carelessly. 'I lay with one of the servants. An ignorant Irish girl but comely enough.' His voice thickens.

'And she had a baby?'

'Yes, that's what happens, you see.' He leers at her. 'I was only a boy, of course. She took advantage of my adolescent urges. She said she loved me. She was a poor thing really. But she had a child, a girl. She called it Bernadette.'

It. Despite everything, Ruth feels tears rush to her eyes. The baby, stabbed, beheaded and buried under the door was Sir Roderick's child. And to him she is still 'it'.

'What about the mother?' she asks.

'Oh, she went back to Ireland. The land of saints and scholars.' He gives that chilling giggle again. 'I buried the body in the garden but when the pater had the arch and the columns built I dug it up and buried it in the hole under the new doorway. An offering to Janus, y'know. Protect our walls and all that. I put the skull in the well. It seemed the right thing to do.' He smiles

complacently.

‘But what have I got to do with all this?’ asks Ruth. Even if she gets free, will she be able to get past Sir Roderick? He is old but he looks fit. And he has a knife.

‘That detective, Nelson, he’s too close to the truth. I’ve told my son that I’ve got Alzheimer’s. He was only too ready to believe that I was going senile. Fits in with what he and his brainless wife already think about me. Anyway, he speaks freely in front of me. Doesn’t think I understand. I got him to take me to the site. I saw you digging there and I knew you would find out the truth. Then, when I was at the police station, I overheard your call. When DCI Nelson rushed out, he left his phone behind. Very careless.’ Giggles. ‘I read your message and I knew. You were having his baby. So, unless he calls off the investigation, I’m going to kill his daughter. It’s only fair after all.’

‘It’s not at all fair!’ Ruth bursts out, in spite of herself.

Roderick ignores her. He continues speaking, in a self-satisfied tone. ‘I saw you at the Roman site. I was there with the Conservative Association. They’d hired a minibus. Very civilised. Then, when I saw you at the house, I made the connection. I thought I’d try to scare you off. I wrote your name on the stone with the blood of a cockerel. Strong magic. I knew the archaeologist from Sussex would find it and tell you. I thought the dead baby was a nice touch. I knew you’d be there that day because you’d had dinner with him the night before.’

‘You’re well-informed,’ says Ruth, between dry lips.

‘My granddaughter works on the site,’ answers Sir Roderick airily. ‘She tells me all the comings and goings.’

‘Your granddaughter?’

‘An uncouth girl. But useful. Then, of course, when Nelson wanted to do the DNA testing, I knew he’d make the link between me and the body. That’s why I had to act. I knew you’d go to the Roman site, to see the stone. I waited for you every morning. I knew you’d come eventually. You were so kind, offering to get something from my car for me. As you were bending over, I hit you over the head with my car torch. A perfectly serviceable tool for the purpose. Then I drove you to the boat.’

‘How did you get me on board?’ Ruth remembers the jolly barbecuing families at the marina. Surely one of them will have noticed a man carrying a prostrate body on board. And, come to

that, how did Roderick manage to carry her?

‘I wrapped you in a carpet. Like Cleopatra.’ Another giggle. ‘I parked my car by the boatyard and one of the men very kindly helped me with my burden. Remarked how heavy the rug was.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘To a house where I have the necessary equipment for libations, et cetera.’ He could be any elderly eccentric talking about his hobby. Except for the knife in his hand and the deranged glint in his eye.

‘No one will think of looking where I’m taking you,’ continues Sir Roderick. ‘Nelson will know he’s been beaten by a better man.’

‘Have you told him?’ If Nelson knows, he will be on his way. He will move heaven and earth to save her, she knows that. Oh please let him have told Nelson.

‘I sent him a text message. A crude form of communication but effective.’

‘You should call him again.’ The police can trace text messages, can’t they?

‘You’re going to call him.’

And, in a worryingly swift movement, he is at her side, holding out a phone with one hand and, with the other, keeping the knife at her throat.

*

Nelson leaves as soon as Clough arrives to keep an eye on the girls. ‘Never fear, Uncle Dave is here,’ are Clough’s opening words as he settles down on the sofa to watch the American high schools kids battling with the undead.

‘For Christ’s sake, keep your wits about you,’ growls Nelson.

‘You can rely on me, boss.’

Nelson reaches forty miles an hour before he has backed out of the close but, beside him, Cathbad is calm and serene. He is the only person Nelson has ever met who is not terrified by his driving.

It is nearly six o’clock. Rush hour time. The roads are thick with traffic and when they reach the outskirts of Norwich Nelson puts the siren on and they weave madly between lanes, forcing other drivers up onto grass verges and scattering bollards like

ninepins.

Cathbad hums a Celtic folk song.

Outside Reedham, the road is blocked because of an accident, stationary traffic in both directions. Nelson thumps the steering wheel.

‘Look at the map,’ he tells Cathbad, ‘find a short cut.’

Cathbad points to an unmade-up road on their left. A pile of abandoned tyres squats by a broken gate. It looks like it couldn’t possibly lead anywhere.

‘Try that way.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve got a good feeling about it.’

Nelson swings to the left. The Mercedes bumps along rutted tractor tracks, occasionally descending into vast, muddy puddles.

‘If my suspension’s buggered, I’ll blame you.’

Cathbad keeps humming.

The lane takes them past deserted barns, abandoned cars and, inexplicably, a smart bungalow offering Bed and Breakfast. Finally, Nelson crashes through overhanging trees and encroaching hedgerows to come to a halt, with his front wheels hanging over the edge of the river bank. He turns wrathfully to Cathbad.

‘It’s a dead end. You—’

But Cathbad is pointing through the trees, where a church tower is just visible.

‘Reedham,’ he says vaguely.

‘How did you—’

‘The flow,’ says Cathbad, ‘you have to go with the flow.’

But Nelson is already striding off along the river bank.

*

At the marina, they find the boat owners in the middle of a party. The wine is flowing and sausages are grilling on the barbecue. Reggae music blasts from one of the boats, a low cruiser called *Dreadlock 2*. Nelson shoves his warrant card in the face of the large man cooking sausages.

‘I’m looking for a boat called the *Lady Annabelle*.’

The man looks blank and there are some giggles, hastily suppressed.

‘I know the *Lady Annabelle*,’ says a voice from the reggae boat. A tall man with waist-length dreadlocks smiles up at them. ‘It’s owned by that professor, isn’t it?’

‘Do you know where it’s parked? Moored?’ asks Nelson impatiently.

‘Sure.’ The man sounds as if he has all the time in the world. Nelson grinds his teeth though Cathbad looks approving. ‘Just along the moorings. To the left.’ He gestures. ‘You can’t miss it. It’s the last boat.’

‘Peace,’ calls Cathbad over his shoulder as he and Nelson march towards the wooden gate.

‘Peace and love,’ calls back the dreadlocked man.

But at the end of the moorings they find only a frayed rope. The *Lady Annabelle* has gone. From the marina they can hear Bob Marley singing about redemption. The river flows past them, dividing into its two directions, mysterious in the evening light. Midges gather around their heads.

‘What now?’ asks Nelson.

‘We trust to the flow?’ suggests Cathbad.

Luckily for Cathbad’s continuing existence, Nelson’s phone rings at that moment. He snatches it up. Number unknown.

The voice, though, is very well-known indeed.

‘Nelson?’

‘Ruth!’

Her voice sounds high and strained, like someone much younger. She speaks without pausing or allowing him to answer.

‘Nelson, you have to call off the investigation or he’ll kill our baby and me too. He’s serious, he’s the real ringslinger. Please Nelson. Save our baby. I can’t tell you where we are. Please Horatio. Save us.’

The phone is clicked off.

Nelson is shaking. He tries to dial the station, get them to trace the call, but his fingers just won’t work. Cathbad grabs his arm.

‘What did she say?’

Nelson just shakes his head. His baby, his unknown beloved baby is in danger. And Ruth – headstrong, feisty Ruth – sounding like a child herself. Ruth, who could be about to die.

‘You’ve got to remember her exact words,’ Cathbad tells him sternly. ‘Tell me and I’ll write them down. Come on, Harry. You can’t go to pieces now.’

Dully, Nelson relates Ruth's exact words. They sound odd but he is pretty sure that he has remembered them correctly. Cathbad writes them down while Nelson rings the station, trying to get a trace on the call.

When he has finished, he looks at Cathbad who is squatting down, frowning at the dirty scrap of paper in front of him. To Nelson's relief, he doesn't mention the 'our baby' part, instead he says, "He's the real ringslinger". What did she mean by that?

'I don't know.'

'And why did she call you Horatio? Is Harry short for Horatio?'

'No.'

'She's giving us a clue,' says Cathbad. 'Well done, Ruth. Attagirl. We just have to work it out. Ringslinger. Ringslinger. There was a Hroerekr Ringslinger, a mythical king of Denmark. Erik used to talk about him.'

'What was his name?' It sounds like gargling to Nelson.

'Hroerekr. Roderick in English.'

'What?'

Cathbad looks up in surprise.

'That's it!' shouts Nelson. 'She's telling us that it's Roderick. Sir Roderick Spens.'

Briefly, he tells Cathbad about the Spens family. When he gets to the part about Annabelle Spens, Cathbad stops him.

'What was the boat called?'

'*Lady Annabelle.*'

'Could it belong to the Spens family?'

'Of course! Max Grey is a friend of Edward Spens. He told me when I interviewed him. Edward must have lent him the boat. That's why Ruth called me Horatio. To remind me of the other Nelson. The famous one. The Admiral. She's telling us that she's on a boat.'

'And what about Max Grey?' asks Cathbad. 'Where's he got to?'

'I'm here,' says a voice at their feet.

30th June

Day of Aestas

... The infant screams and keeps on screaming. Even the knife in her chest doesn't seem to stop her. Clearly the child is possessed of an evil spirit. Closing my eyes and muttering a prayer to the Lady, I stab and stab. When I open my eyes there is blood over the bed, the walls, everything.

She is dead but the screaming goes on.

CHAPTER 33

‘Why did you call him Horatio?’

‘Harry’s short for Horatio,’ lies Ruth. ‘He doesn’t like people to know. I called him that so he would know it was me.’

Roderick nods, satisfied. Ruth holds her breath, hoping that he doesn’t query ‘ringslinger’ but perhaps Roderick regards it as an example of young people’s slang (he has already lectured Ruth at length on the decline of literacy amongst the youth of today) because he doesn’t comment further. Ruth knows it’s a long shot but maybe Nelson would be sufficiently intrigued to Google Ringslinger and find the Danish king, the grandfather, according to Erik, of Hamlet. Cathbad would have known, she thinks, but she has no idea where Cathbad is.

‘You’re a fallen woman,’ says Roderick chattily, removing the knife from Ruth’s neck. ‘Just like the Irish whore.’

Ruth says nothing. If she hadn’t been tied up, she would have kicked him in the balls.

‘You knew Nelson was married but you still lay with him. You’re a whore.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Well,’ says Roderick as if they have just finished a cosy chat over the cucumber sandwiches, ‘I’d better get back to the helm.’

*

Max is, in fact, sitting in a dinghy. With the ease of long practice, he ties the boat to the landing stage and scrambles ashore.

‘I think Roderick Spens has kidnapped Ruth,’ he says. ‘I went to the site this morning. I thought she might be there, to see the Janus Stone, but it was deserted. I was going to ring you but I got a call from the boatyard to say that someone had taken the *Lady Annabelle*. An elderly man. He was loading something heavy on board. They thought it was suspicious.’

‘Did they say where he was going?’ asks Cathbad.

Max looks dubiously at Cathbad, whose purple cloak is wet and muddy from the trek along the river bank.

‘Cathbad’s helping with the enquiry,’ says Nelson brusquely.

‘We need to know Ruth’s whereabouts. We think she’s in serious danger.’

Max still looks suspicious but he answers quickly enough, ‘They said he was asking about the height of Potter Heigham Bridge.’

Nelson and Cathbad look at him blankly.

‘It’s a bridge over the Thurne,’ says Max. ‘Very low. Lots of boats get stuck. If they’re going that way, I think they’re heading for Horsey Mere. The Spens family have got a cottage there.’

More blank looks.

‘It’s a little-known stretch of waterway,’ says Max, ‘on the North Rivers.’

‘Which way will he go?’ asks Nelson.

Max points to the fork in the water. ‘If he’s going to the North Rivers, he’ll go that way. Along the Yare to Yarmouth.’

‘Can we catch him at Yarmouth?’

Max looks at his watch. ‘The boatyard said he went past at four o’clock. He’ll be through Yarmouth by now.’

Nelson looks at his watch. It is half past seven.

‘Can we catch them by road?’ he asks. ‘I drive fast.’

Max shakes his head. ‘Our best bet is to try to get to Potter Heigham before them. He’ll have to take the canopy off the boat before it can get under the bridge. That’ll slow them down a bit.’

‘Let’s go then,’ says Nelson.

*

The boat is moving. The rocking motion becomes unpleasantly violent and Ruth is afraid that she will be sick. She can’t be sick. She needs to escape from this lunatic with his frightening Victorian language and his terrifyingly modern knife. He killed his own child, now he wants to kill her baby. Well Ruth is not about to let that happen.

If she can just get across to the other side of the boat, she can reach the kitchen cabinet where there are sure to be knives and other sharp implements. It’s so close, just an arm’s length away. If she can get herself free, she thinks she should be a match for Roderick Spens, knife and all.

Gingerly, she rolls over so that her legs, tied tightly together, are on the floor. Then, without warning, she is hit by a wave of

nausea so intense that she knows she must be sick. It is awful having her hands tied behind her back because she can't move her hair out of the way. All she can do is tilt her head as far away as possible so that the vomit doesn't land on her feet. She continues to retch feebly until her stomach is empty and then she lies back on the bench with her eyes shut. She hopes that Roderick hasn't heard her but the noise of the engine is surprisingly loud. She realises that they must be travelling fast. If so, that might be a good thing. It might alert the river police, other sailors, anyone.

She lies still, listening. Above the engine noise, she can hear Sir Roderick singing snatches of opera. Nutcase. Slowly she slides her legs over again and tries to stand. Another spasm of nausea grips her stomach but she isn't sick again. She waits, breathing hard, and then, holding on to the edge of the table behind her, starts to hop towards the knives.

*

They find Sir Roderick's car by the boatyard. This is hardly difficult as it is a maroon Rolls Royce with the licence plate SPENS2.

'Jesus,' says Nelson. 'He was hardly travelling incognito.'

'He's not supposed to drive at all,' says Max. 'Edward says he has Alzheimer's.'

'Edward is wrong,' Nelson tells him.

Max chews his lip. 'Even so, Sir Roderick has always been strange. When we were at university, Edward used to mention his father doing odd things. Being obsessed with certain Roman gods, offering sacrifices and such like. He once broke into Fishbourne Roman Palace and started strewing herbs and flowers around. Edward used to worry about him.'

'With good reason,' says Nelson. 'I'll get some uniforms down to look at the car. I'll call the river police too.'

'They're going to the North Rivers,' says Max.

'So?'

'The river police don't cover the North Rivers. There's a ranger but they've only got one car and they don't work at night.'

'Jesus.' Nelson raises his eyes to the heavens and curses the day that he ever heard of Norfolk, the river, or Ruth Galloway. Max

watches him narrowly. 'Come on,' he says at last, 'we've got to get to Potter Heigham before they do.'

*

Three hops and she's there. She leans against the sink, feeling ill and faint. Her head aches, presumably where Roderick whacked it with his 'perfectly serviceable' torch. Probably right on the spot where she hit it once before, when Roderick left a model foetus in the trench as a 'warning'. If she gets out of this alive, she swears she is going to kill him.

Opening the sink drawer with no hands will be the next problem. She looks around for anything sharp left lying around but everything is irritatingly tidy. Damn Max and his anal archaeologist habits. Where *is* Max anyhow? How come Roderick has got his boat? The truly dreadful thought, which has been hovering at the back of her mind for hours, now pops, fully formed, to the surface. What if Max is in league with Sir Roderick? After all, Max and Edward Spens were friends at university. Max could easily have helped Roderick leave those grisly offerings at the site. Max could even have given him the idea. He is another classicist, another fan of the Roman gods. He knows all about Hecate, all about Janus and Nemesis and the rest of the bad guys. Could Max really be plotting to kill her?

No, it can't be true. Max came back because he was drawn to the place where he had lived with Elizabeth. No. She mustn't let herself think like that. Roderick must be acting alone. He is mad enough, God knows.

But where *is* Max?

The drawer has an obligingly protruding handle. Ruth bends down and takes it firmly between her teeth. Then she pulls. It's surprising how much it hurts but the drawer opens and inside Ruth can see at least three sharp knives, one with wonderful serrated edges. She turns round, trying to get her bound hands into the drawer.

'Oh no you don't,' says a voice behind her.

*

When they reach the car, mist descends. Literally, one minute they can see the car parked precariously on the river bank, see

Reedham behind them and the unmade-up road in front and the next, nothing. Just thick white fog, billowing up in clouds from the water, leaving them, seemingly, alone in the world.

‘River mist,’ says Max. ‘Comes down in seconds.’

‘This will make it easier for Spens to avoid detection,’ says Nelson.

Max nods. ‘You can’t see a thing on the river in a fog like this.’

‘Is it safe to drive a boat?’

‘You don’t drive a boat.’

Nelson snorts impatiently and Max hurries on to say, ‘No. When visibility’s this poor, you shouldn’t be on the water at all.’

There is a silence where they all think of Roderick – old, unpractised, almost certainly mad – sailing, in a thick fog, towards a low bridge and dangerous waters, with Ruth on board.

‘Come on,’ says Nelson. ‘We’ve got to catch him.’

The journey to Potter Heigham, with visibility down to a few metres, is a terrifying one. Nelson can’t see Max who is in the back, the subordinate’s seat, but Cathbad seems perfectly calm, even, at one point, closing his eyes. Nelson himself is rigid with tension. He has to rescue Ruth. He can’t let himself even contemplate the idea that he may be too late.

They almost drive straight past the boatyard, which is set back from the road, a long low jetty surrounded by boats. Nelson gets out of the car and immediately steps in a muddy puddle.

‘Jesus.’

‘We’re right by the bridge here,’ says Max, nimbly avoiding the water. He gestures but they can see nothing, only thick grey clouds merging with the grey water. The lights from the boatyard are hazy and spectral, will-o’-the wisps in the fog.

At first, the boatman refuses to let them rent a boat.

‘Visibility’s too bad. You’ll never get through the bridge or see the posts on the other side.’

‘Post markers,’ Max explains, ‘they tell you which way to go. Towards the sea it’s red on the right, green on the left.’

Nelson impatiently waves his warrant card in the boatman’s face. ‘Police. We have a trained pilot with us.’

‘Helmsman,’ mutters Max.

The boatman still looks worried but he leads them along the river bank. A dozen low, white boats are chained to mooring posts. They look flimsy in the extreme, just two seats in front and

two at the back, low in the water, more like remote control toys than anything built for full-size adults.

‘They’re electric,’ says Max, seeing their faces, ‘ideal for this stretch of water.’

‘Electricity is good,’ says Cathbad. It seems the first time he has spoken in hours.

‘Why?’ asks Nelson.

‘It’s silent.’

*

Sir Roderick is standing halfway up the step, slightly above her. Making a split-second decision, Ruth butts her head at him, hitting him squarely in the stomach. He falls sideways, with a startled ‘oomp’ of surprise, and lands on the bench. But the force of the collision makes Ruth stumble too and, with her hands and legs tied, she can’t right herself. She can hear Roderick stumbling about, breathing hard. She hasn’t knocked him out then. She rolls onto her knees, struggling to get enough leverage to stand. But her leg muscles aren’t strong enough. If only she’d been to the gym even once since her induction session. She tries again, rocking to and fro to try to get some momentum.

Then her head explodes with pain and everything is dark.

*

The fog is now so thick that they can hardly see each other. The boatman’s face is a wavery white disc on the river bank and Max, in his dark jumper, has vanished altogether. The boatman gives them life jackets but Nelson and Max just throw theirs into the bottom of the boat. Cathbad, though, ties his carefully over his purple cloak. The flimsy structure rocks alarmingly as the three men get on board.

‘We need to balance ourselves,’ says Max. ‘Cathbad, you stay on the same side as me.’

‘So I weigh as much as both of you together,’ mutters Nelson but he climbs into the front seat beside Max. Cathbad sits behind them, shivering in the exposed part of the boat. Ahead of them they can see nothing. When Max turns on the lights, all they do is reflect the mist back to them, light motes dancing in smoke.

‘This is madness,’ says Max, turning the key in the ignition.

‘Just drive,’ growls Nelson.
Max does not dare to correct him.

*

When Ruth wakes, her first thought is that she must be dead. She feels dreamy and uncoordinated, as if her limbs do not belong to her. Then, looking out of the porthole, she sees only greyness, neither land nor sea. No water, no trees, no other boats – nothing. This is one of those near-death moments; the long tunnel that leads – where? The bright light and your departed loved ones welcoming you home? The operating table and the painful recall to life? Then the word ‘fog’ comes into her mind and she breathes a sigh of relief. It is all right. She is not dead. It’s just a river fog.

Then, painfully, her body starts to come back to her. Her head is pulsating with pain and the familiar sick feeling rises in her stomach. But the nausea is good because it reminds her of her baby. She has to survive for the sake of her daughter. Hang on in there, sweetheart, she tells her, I’ll get us out of this.

Then she sees it. A nail in the wall, holding up a Glories of Norfolk calendar. A proper honest-to-goodness solid nail, not just a pin tack. Carefully, Ruth loops her hands over it and starts sawing away at the rope. The calendar swings wildly but the nail holds. In a few seconds her hands are free. Quickly, she unties her feet, swallowing down another wave of sickness. Then she opens the sink drawer and selects the serrated knife. She waits for a second, weighing the knife in her hand, then turns back to the step and pushes the hatch to the upper deck. It is locked. Ruth pauses, breathing heavily. Can she force the hatch open or is there another way out?

Suddenly she falls backwards as a terrible noise rocks the boat, as if the sky is being ripped off the world.

*

Nelson, Max and Cathbad hear it too. They recoil, as if from a physical blow. Max cuts the engine, Cathbad flings an arm up over his face.

‘What the hell was that?’ he breathes.

‘The sound of a boat going under the bridge,’ says Max grimly.

‘The *Lady Annabelle*?’

‘I think so. There were no lights. Why would anyone be out on a night like this with no navigation lights?’

‘Have they run aground?’ asks Nelson.

Max listens. ‘No. I think they’re through. That was the sound of the hull hitting the side of the bridge.’

‘Will it have damaged the boat?’

‘Yes,’ says Max sadly.

‘Good,’ says Nelson, ‘then we’ve got more chance of catching them. Can you get us through the bridge?’

‘I’m going to try,’ says Max.

*

For a few seconds the boat is in complete darkness. Ruth sits crouched on the floor wondering what the hell is happening. The noise continues, like a thousand nails scraping along a blackboard. Then, as suddenly as it started, it stops and the light outside the window is grey once more. Ruth stands up and looks around the boat. At the end is Max’s bed, neatly made, with Elizabeth’s dog on the pillow. Above the bed is a hatch that looks as if it slides open. Ruth tries to think about the geography of the boat. If she gets out of the hatch can she possibly edge around the side of the boat and take Roderick by surprise? It will be dangerous, the fog is thick and Ruth is not exactly agile at the best of times, even if she wasn’t four months pregnant. But she has to try.

She climbs onto the bed and tries the catch. To her delight the hatch opens easily, sliding back to create a hole big enough to climb through. Gingerly, she sticks her head out. The air is cold and the mist seems almost solid, as if it will take an effort to cut through it. Come on, Ruth, she tells herself, you can do it. It’s only a bit of fog, what harm can it do you? But the grey world outside fills her with dread. And she is afraid, horribly afraid, of the elderly monster at the helm of the boat. She begins to shiver so violently that her teeth chatter and it is only by a massive effort of will that she forces herself to move. You owe it to the baby, she tells herself, you have to get her to safety. This last thought is strong enough to get her foot on the edge of the hatch.

She finds herself standing on the very front of the boat, the prow. Luckily it is flat though it rocks slightly beneath her feet.

Can Sir Roderick see her? She doesn't think so. She can hardly see her own hands as they feel for the side of the boat. Thank God there is a handrail. Slowly, quietly, she begins to crawl towards the stern.

*

They sense rather than see the bridge. A feeling that some large, solid structure is nearby. Then, without warning, they are plunged into darkness. Nelson sees Max's knuckles white on the wheel and hears Cathbad's sharp intake of breath. Then the greyness is around them again.

'Well done,' says Nelson to Max. 'Where are we now?'

'Heading towards Horsey Mere,' says Max.

'And they're here too?'

'They must be right ahead of us.'

It is like voyaging into the afterlife. They have left behind the solid world and entered into a dream state, moving silently between billowing white clouds. There is nothing to anchor them to their surroundings: no landmarks, no sounds, no earth or sky. There is only this slow progress through the endless whiteness, the sound of their own breathing and the lap of the water against the sides of the boat. Nelson, looking at his phone, is not surprised to see that he has no signal. It would have seemed incredible if anything as prosaic as a mobile phone signal could have penetrated this unearthly fog. It is nine o'clock but it could be any time, day or night. There is no moon and no sun, just the grey nothingness all around them.

'It's like crossing the River Kormet into the Land of the Dead,' says Cathbad dreamily.

Max looks round and Nelson sees his eyes gleam through the mist, 'Yes, or the River Styx. Interesting how many mythologies involve river crossings.'

'Spare us the lecture,' says Nelson, who is leaning forward, trying to force the boat onwards through sheer effort of will.

'Can't we go faster than this?'

'No,' says Max. 'We'll be into Candle Dyke soon. I don't want to miss the markers.'

But the dream world gives nothing away.

Sir Roderick appears as if by a particularly malign form of magic. One moment she is moving carefully along the side of the boat, one hand on the rail, whiteness in front and behind, and the next she sees his red face, white hair and wide, surprised eyes. He is standing holding the wheel and Ruth knows that now is her moment. She has the advantage of surprise. Jumping forwards, she launches herself at him.

The wheel slides out of his hands but, for an old man, his reactions are remarkably quick. He throws up an arm and hits Ruth in the face. She stumbles and the knife clatters to the floor. Unmanned, the boat drifts slowly to the left. Ruth scrabbles about frantically for the knife and breathes a sigh of relief when her fingers close around its wooden handle. But when she straightens up she is looking into the barrel of a gun.

CHAPTER 34

At first Ruth assumes that the gun is a fake. There is something polished and old-fashioned about it and, after all, Roderick is an old man, a feeble old windbag who likes to go on trips with the Conservative Association. So, with the gun pointing at her, Ruth says, in a reasonably calm tone, 'Don't be silly. Keep your eye on the boat.'

Roderick's answer is to fire the gun in the air. The shock of the report, coupled with the acrid smell of gunpowder, almost make Ruth vomit again. Like Roderick, the gun may be antique but it is still deadly.

'There you are, my dear,' says Roderick smugly, 'I'm not just a silly old man with a gun, am I? I know how to shoot. I got my Blue at Cambridge.'

Ruth had heard enough about Cambridge to last her a lifetime. Quite suddenly her fear crystallises into anger and she finds herself shouting back, 'I don't care where the hell you went to university. Just let me get off this bloody boat!'

Roderick's answer is to approach her, still smiling, and place the muzzle of the gun firmly in her stomach.

'Be impertinent again, my dear, and I'll shoot your baby dead.'

There is a silence. The boat continues to drift to the left and, in one corner of her mind, Ruth hopes that it will run aground or hit another bridge or something. But the rest of her mind is concentrated feverishly on the madman who is threatening her life – and the life which she now realised is dearer than her own. She stares into Sir Roderick's filmy eyes. There must be something she can say, something that will divert him, will make him see what he is doing, would make him see her as another human being. But then, she remembers, this is a man who killed his own daughter, in cold blood when he was still a teenager. There is no reason to believe that he has learnt humanity in the intervening years.

They continue to look at each other when, suddenly, as if from miles away, Ruth hears a distinct shout of 'Ruth!'

Sir Roderick is momentarily distracted. As he turns away, Ruth shouts, 'Help!' as loudly as she can. Her voice echoes back to her

uselessly, deadened by the fog. Sir Roderick wheels back round to face her and Ruth shoots her hand upwards and knocks the gun from his grasp.

‘Bitch!’ spits Sir Roderick, attempting to hit her across the face. But Ruth is on her knees looking for the gun. She can’t see anything but she knows it is here somewhere. Her fingers touch tarpaulin, polished wood, brass and then, miraculously, the cold muzzle of the gun. She stands up and faces Sir Roderick.

‘Keep away from me or I’ll shoot.’

Sir Roderick laughs, a genuine guffaw this time, probably born of a lifetime of despising women.

‘Shoot! Women can’t shoot.’

Ruth pulls the trigger.

*

It was Nelson who had shouted. He hears the first gunshot and yells wildly into the fog though he has no idea where the sound has come from. Then, suddenly, Cathbad calls, ‘Look out!’ and the *Lady Annabelle* looms out of the mist, heading straight towards them. The little boat now looks vast, a huge black shadow, silent and menacing.

‘Ruth!’ shouts Nelson again.

He hears someone shout back but can’t make out any words. Then he is almost thrown overboard as Max veers frantically to the left, trying to avoid the larger boat.

‘What’s he playing at?’ Nelson yells at Max, his face wet with spray.

‘I don’t think there’s anyone at the helm,’ Max shouts back.

Is Sir Roderick dead then? Is he, even now, fighting desperately with Ruth? He cannot allow himself to think that Ruth might be dead. Ruth and his unnamed, unknown, daughter.

‘We’re in Candle Dyke now,’ says Max, and Nelson is suddenly aware that there is space all around them. Before, although they couldn’t see the river bank, they knew it was there but now there is nothingness, just a sense of expanding water and silence. The *Lady Annabelle* has vanished again and, high above, they hear the call of seagulls.

‘Where the hell have they gone?’ yells Nelson.

Then the second gunshot echoes across the water.

That's it. Ignoring Cathbad's warning shout Nelson jumps straight into the river. He has no idea where he is going, he just knows that he can't stand to wait for one second longer, a useless bystander, hearing sounds of gunfire and doing nothing. Somehow he just has to get nearer. He has to get to Ruth.

The water is freezing and the fog seems to have got into his eyes, blinding him, making him choke and gasp. For a few seconds he knows he is going to drown, then some survival instinct makes him strike out, struggling through the black water, his heavy clothes dragging him down.

Then, suddenly, it is in front of him. The hull of the boat, as huge and unattainable as a skyscraper. Treading water, he yells, 'Ruth!'

He hears Max shouting but his voice seems to come from miles away. Nelson can only think about the obstacle in front of him. He has to get on the boat, he has to save Ruth. God knows what that bastard will have done to her. He beats uselessly against the *Lady Annabelle's* metal sides. He can see a rail about a foot above him but there is nothing to grab hold of. He flails wildly and falls back, going under then rising, spluttering, to the surface. As he does so, something heavy hits the water just a few inches away from him.

It is a body, he is sure. He hears how heavily it falls and he knows, without any doubt, that the body will be dead when it hits the water. For a moment, he feels nothing. His entire body, his entire self, is numb. Even as he swims towards the dark shape in the water, he knows that it is all over. He knows that she is dead.

*

Max has been desperately following in the electric boat. He sees Nelson reach the *Lady Annabelle* and try to get a handhold on her side. Max swings the smaller boat round, attempting to get alongside. Next to him, Cathbad is silent for once. He had shouted 'Harry!' when Nelson went overboard. Once, Max had thought that Cathbad loved Ruth. Now he isn't so sure.

The *Lady Annabelle* is still coming towards them and Max has to act quickly to save his boat from being rammed. He can see Nelson bobbing in the water and then he hears a splintering crash

and sees a body falling.

‘Oh no,’ Cathbad whispers.

‘Hold tight,’ says Max. He swings the electric boat round almost at a right angle and somehow he is beside Nelson, who is supporting the body in a lifeguard’s hold, barely keeping his head above water.

‘Hang on, Nelson,’ Max shouts, ‘I’m here.’

With Cathbad’s help, he hauls the body into the boat. It is frighteningly heavy; a dead weight. Then Cathbad helps Nelson in; he is shivering and crying, he seems to have completely taken leave of his senses.

Max is bending over the body. He looks up and suddenly the mist clears, revealing a full moon like a baleful eye.

‘It’s not her,’ he says gently.

CHAPTER 35

It is June the twenty-first, the longest day. In the evening Max is holding a party at the Roman site to celebrate both the summer solstice and the end of the dig. Cathbad will be there, complete with dowsing rod, mistletoe crown and oak staff. Ruth is also invited, along with most of the staff from the archaeology department. But Nelson, though invited, is instead on his way to Sussex to visit Father Patrick Hennessey.

He is not quite sure why. Over the phone, he told Hennessey that he wanted to 'clear up some loose ends' but, in truth, all the loose ends in the case of Bernadette McKinley have been well and truly laid to rest. Two weeks ago, Father Hennessey himself conducted the funeral service for the little girl who died over fifty years ago, at the hands of her father.

Bernadette's mother was not at the funeral. When Judy turned up at the convent, on the morning after her interview with Sister Immaculata, she was told that the nun had died in the night. 'Did she see a priest?' Father Hennessey asked urgently when he was told. Yes, Judy said, Father Connor was with her at the end and administered the last rites. Judy knows, and Nelson knows too, the importance of this. Sister Immaculata may have confessed to Judy but this is not the confession that would matter most.

Although neither parent could be present, the little dusty church was not quite empty for the short ceremony. Nelson was there, as were Clough and the newly promoted Detective Sergeant Judy Johnson. Ruth, Max and Cathbad also attended, the latter dressed quite conservatively in a black shirt and jeans. Irish Ted and Trace were also there, Trace wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her lacy purple top.

Edward and Marion Spens sat in the front row, staring straight in front of them. 'After all,' said Edward afterwards, rather unsteadily, to Nelson, 'she was my half-sister. It just seems unbelievable that ...' His voice trailed off. Nelson sympathised with the unspoken words. Almost unbelievable that Edward's father turned out to be a murderer who killed a child while in his teens and attempted murder again as a seventy-year-old? Almost unbelievable that the crime lay buried for over half a century,

while the killer's son planned to dig up the land for profit? Almost unbelievable that, on the same site, a children's home would provide a refuge for hundreds of children and yet two would run away, one dying soon afterwards? All of it is unbelievable, yet all of it is only too true. Nelson grasped Edward Spens' hand briefly then walked away through the tombstones. There was nothing else left to say.

At the church gate he stopped and spoke to Trace, who was still mopping her eyes.

'I've just been speaking to your uncle.'

She looked up at him. 'How did you know?'

'It wasn't difficult,' said Nelson though, in truth, the connection escaped him for a long time, even after he saw the names on Judy's family tree. Charlotte Spens, children Tracy and Luke. Though, of course, Trace's surname isn't Spens, which made it less obvious. Still, her presence explained why Sir Roderick was able to know so much about what went on both at the Swaffham dig and at Woolmarket Road.

Trace looked shell shocked, much as her uncle had done. 'I can't believe that Grandad ... Mum quarrelled with Uncle Edward, you see, so we didn't really see the rest of the family. But I'd always liked Grandad. He always seemed such a sweet old thing. We used to talk about history, about the Romans. It was something we had in common.'

'Let's hope it's the only thing,' said Nelson soberly, turning away to talk to Ruth.

Ruth had looked pale and tired but otherwise in good enough health. Her pregnancy was now obvious, even in the unflatteringly baggy black suit.

'Are you OK?' he asked.

'Fine,' she smiled rather shakily. 'I'm glad we had this funeral. It feels right.'

'Yes,' Nelson agreed, 'it feels right.'

He was about to say more when Clough bore down on them, suggesting a visit to a nearby pub. 'It's the proper thing to do after a funeral. Ask any Irishman.' In the background, Irish Ted was nodding vigorously.

'I'd better get back to work,' said Ruth. 'Goodbye, Nelson.'

And she had leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. It was their first physical contact since their child had been conceived.

When the police boarded the *Lady Annabelle* that night in early June, they had found Ruth sitting huddled on the deck, holding the gun. 'I killed him,' she kept saying, 'I killed him.' Nelson, had he been there, would have told her to keep this thought to herself. But Nelson was, at the time, sitting in an ambulance wrapped in a silver foil blanket and babbling about his daughters. The reinforcements, two police cars and an ambulance, had arrived almost as soon as Max pulled Sir Roderick's dead body out of the water. The *Lady Annabelle* had drifted harmlessly onto the river bank. The policemen, local boys, boarded the boat easily, leaving their squad car parked in the reeds, its lights flashing eerily in the mist.

Ruth was convinced that she had killed Sir Roderick Spens. After all, didn't she pull the trigger and see him fall, arms flailing helplessly, through the wooden railing of the boat? But the post-mortem (performed by an indecently cheery Chris Stevenson) showed that there were no bullet wounds on Sir Roderick's body. Cause of death was a blow to the head, probably sustained when he fell. The bullet was later found, wedged into one of the *Lady Annabelle's* bench seats. Ruth was relieved but the verdict does not alter her fundamental belief that she was the cause of the old man's death. She had wanted to kill him. Isn't intent to kill the same as murder?

This is something that Nelson could discuss with Father Patrick Hennessey. He knows, as he joins the traffic edging over the Dartford Bridge, that his visit is about more than police business. The Woolmarket Street case is closed. Whitcliffe is, if not happy, at least satisfied that none of the details have made it to the press (though the local papers did report the death of Sir Roderick Spens in a boating accident). Edward Spens is going ahead with the building development. 'Life must go on,' he said sententiously to Nelson, as if Nelson might be about to dispute the fact. He plans to call the apartment block 'Bernadette House'.

But Nelson knows, in his heart, that nothing is over. They may know who killed Bernadette, they may know what happened to Elizabeth Black (forensics have uncovered the bones buried in the school playground – Father Hennessey will have another funeral to conduct) but the feelings stirred up by the deaths of these little girls (Annabelle Spens too) are not so easily buried. Fathers and daughters, this is the phrase that keeps running through Nelson's

head. He will shortly be the father of three daughters. This is the thought that now keeps him awake at night, the thought that has sent him speeding down the motorway towards the retired Catholic priest.

Confession? He hasn't said the word aloud to himself but when he greets Father Hennessey and the older man suggests a walk in the secluded part of the garden, he knows that this is what he has come for. Once a Catholic ... he smiles grimly to himself. Father Damian would be proud of him.

At first they discuss the Woolmarket Street case.

'Have you any idea why Sir Roderick Spens did this terrible thing?' asks Father Hennessey.

'Edward Spens found his diaries,' says Nelson, following the priest down a path overgrown with lavender and lemon balm. 'He kept a diary from when he was a child. It's all there, the murder and everything. Weirdest thing you ever read. Like a cross between Adrian Mole and Jack the Ripper.'

'He must have been a very troubled soul.'

'Troubled? Yes.' Nelson gives a bark of humourless laughter. 'But he managed to go through life without anyone suspecting. I mean, Edward Spens knew his father was odd. That was why he lived with them, to keep him out of trouble. But he never suspected that he was a murderer.'

'And yet it came to light in the end,' murmurs Hennessey. 'Evil can't stay hidden for ever.'

They have reached a sunken garden, out of sight of the house. They sit on a low bench, still warm from the sun. In front of them is a fountain, a mere trickle of water descending from the mouth of a stone fish. The dappled light overhead turns the spray into a hazy rainbow, yellow, green and blue.

Father Hennessey turns to face Nelson. 'Why did you want to see me, my son?'

Nelson takes a deep breath. 'I wanted to ask your advice.'

Hennessey inclines his head but says nothing. The silence trick. Nelson recognises it but that doesn't stop him from falling into the trap and singing like a bird.

'I'm a married man, Father. I love my wife and I love our two daughters.' He pauses. Those terrible few hours when he thought his daughters were in danger have impressed on him just how much he does love them. He would do anything for them, even

(at Michelle's insistence) invite Laura's boyfriend for Sunday lunch.

'I love my wife,' he repeats, 'but a few months ago I ... slept with someone else. I'm not making excuses, I knew it was wrong, but it was at a very difficult time ... for me and for the other woman. We just came together, didn't think about the consequences. But now she's pregnant. She's expecting my baby, a girl. And I don't know what to do.'

Nelson stares at the fountain, the water falling endlessly into the stone bowl. Father Hennessey's voice is calm.

'You say you love your wife. Do you love this other woman?'

Nelson is silent for a moment and then he says, 'I don't know. I care about her. I care about her and the baby. I want to look after her.' He laughs, rather harshly. 'My wife does too. That's the weirdest thing. She knows this woman and wants to help her. With the baby and everything. My wife wants to befriend the woman who's having my baby. You couldn't make it up.'

'Love is always a force for good,' says Hennessey gently. 'Your love for your wife and daughters, for this woman and her unborn baby. Even your wife's kindness towards her. These are all good things.'

Nelson turns towards him, his eyes are wet. 'How can it be good? If my wife finds out, our marriage will be over.'

'Are you sure about that?'

'You think I should tell her then?'

'I can't give you advice,' says Hennessey, 'although I know that's what you want. I can only tell you that a baby is always a blessing, love is always a blessing. You care about these people, you will find a way.'

Nelson nods. He stares ahead, watching the light play on the water. He hardly notices when Father Hennessey puts his hand gently on his head and murmurs a blessing before walking away, back to the house.

*

Evening and Max's party is in full swing. The lonely hill, where once the Roman occupiers had huddled together against the cold Norfolk wind, is now full of people. Someone has set up speakers by one of the trenches and Leah's uncle has brought barrels of

beer and cider from the pub. Irish Ted and Trace are dancing amongst the mounds of soil and stones. Ruth sees Clough, wearing a Manchester United shirt, cut in and dance with Trace, showing surprisingly good hip action. If Clough has come, why isn't Nelson here?

Ruth wanders away. She feels tired and wishes there was somewhere to sit down. Another five months of this! At least the baby seems to have suffered no adverse effects from that terrible night on the *Lady Annabelle*. Ruth has had a checkup and another scan and the baby was fine, dancing happily in the grey clouds of Ruth's womb. 'A large baby,' the technician had said. Typical. Nelson gets her pregnant with a giant baby and then buggers off. She will definitely insist that she supports Arsenal.

Ruth herself has recovered rather more slowly. She still can't shake the idea that she killed Roderick Spens. In her dreams, she sees herself pulling the trigger and Roderick's face disintegrating in a horrific shower of blood and bone. The actual events, with Roderick falling almost in slow motion, the wooden rail splintering and the long wait before the body hit the water, seem less real than the nightmare. She didn't kill him but she wanted to. And this, she knows, is the reality. She knows that she would have killed a man to save herself and to save her baby.

'Ruth!' She looks up to see Max approaching. So far he has been circulating, showing the ability to schmooze required of any successful archaeologist (one reason, perhaps, why Ruth will never reach the top in the profession). He has chatted heartily with Phil, hand in hand with a glowing Shona (the deadline of the final examiners' meeting is still a month away), grasped the hands of all the volunteers and spent an intense fifteen minutes with the local press. He will go far, there's no doubt about it.

Ruth has been happy to watch Max from a distance. The last thing she wants is to talk to the press – or to Phil. Her own relationship with Max, the bond she feels with him, has been strengthened by Max's appearance on that fateful night. It was Max who turned up in the police car to tell Ruth that he, Cathbad and Nelson had been following her in an electric boat. He told her about Nelson's kamikaze dive into the water. 'When he thought you were hurt, he just went crazy.' They had looked at each other and Ruth knew that Max knew that Nelson was the father of her baby. Neither of them said anything though. Max

held Ruth's hand all the way to the hospital.

Now he is smiling. The dig has been successful. He will be going back to Sussex to write up the results. Even the *Lady Annabelle* has been saved and Edward has offered him the use of the boat whenever he wants. Somehow he doesn't think Ruth will be joining him on board.

'It's a great party,' says Ruth.

'You know what party animals archaeologists are.'

Ruth looks over to where two earnest women are discussing Roman pottery, and smiles.

'Let me know when the hard drugs start circulating.'

'I've got something to show you,' says Max.

Ruth looks at him warily. She feels that she has had enough surprises to last her a lifetime. But Max is smiling and the party is going on all round them. Surely the underworld is far away.

Max takes her hand and leads her to his car. The front window is slightly open and on the back seat is a large black dog. When the dog sees them it goes mad with delight, wagging its entire back end. It is a slim, slinky animal with a whiskery, smiling face. Ruth finds herself smiling back.

'Do you remember the breathing you heard on the site? I said I thought it might be a dog?' asks Max, leaning in to pat the now delirious dog. 'Well, this is her. She's a stray, been hanging round the site for weeks, so I thought I'd take her in.'

'A dog is for life ...' says Ruth, pointing to the car sticker.

'Well, exactly. And I think I need some company.' Max's face darkens momentarily but lightens when the dog leaps through the window and flings herself on him.

'She wants to join the party,' says Ruth, who is thinking that the dog is more gregarious than she is. A party animal.

'I'd better put her on the lead,' says Max. 'She might get overexcited with so many people about.'

'What's her name?'

'Claudia.' Max grins. 'It's a suitably Roman name and she does have claws, as I know to my cost.'

Ruth pats the leaping, wriggling dog. 'Will you have room for her in Brighton?'

'Yes, I've got a garden and I'm looking forward to long walks on the seafront. It'll keep me fit.'

He looks pretty fit already but Ruth does not say this. Max

hands her Claudia's lead (slightly to her alarm) and rustles around in the boot of the Range Rover.

'I've got something for you.'

He emerges with a carrier bag which he hands to Ruth.

'What ...?'

'Look inside.'

Ruth looks and sees another dog. A stuffed one this time, rather battered by the years, but still smiling.

'Elizabeth's dog,' says Max, rather thickly. 'She called it Wolfie. I thought your baby should have it. It's ridiculous me keeping it, after all.'

Ruth looks from the stuffed dog to Max, holding Claudia on the lead, and her eyes suddenly fill with tears.

'Thank you,' she says. 'I'm very honoured.'

'No doubt Nelson will say it constitutes a health hazard,' says Max, more briskly, 'but I'm sure you won't listen to him.'

'Why change the habit of a lifetime?'

They rejoin the party and Ruth unbends sufficiently to dance with Irish Ted. In the distance, she can see Cathbad building the inevitable bonfire.

'You're a good mover for a pregnant lady,' says Ted.

'Thank you.'

He smiles, gold tooth glinting, and Ruth remembers what she has always wanted to ask him. Leaning forward, she whispers, 'Why are you called Irish Ted?'

'Don't tell anyone,' whispers back Ted. 'I am Irish but I'm not really called Ted.'

*

It is past midnight but the bonfire is still glowing. Ruth walks slowly down the hill. She is exhausted but it was a good party. Cathbad has danced in honour of the Sun God, Max has finished his dig and gained a companion, and she isn't going home alone. She smiles at the woman walking next to her. It had been Cathbad who suggested that she invite her mother – 'Gaia the Earth Goddess, you know. The eternal mother. It's all linked' – and, rather to Ruth's surprise, her mother had readily accepted. She has spent the evening talking to Max about mosaics, singing madrigals with the Druids, and dancing with both Clough and

Ted. Now, she puts an arm round Ruth.

‘Tired?’

‘A bit.’

‘We’ll go home and have a nice cup of tea. Then you should go to bed. You need your sleep when you’re pregnant.’

Roman mothers, thinks Ruth, were probably saying the same thing to their daughters on this same site, two thousand years ago. Come in and sit by the hearth, have some herbal infusion and pray to Hecate for a safe delivery.

Everything changes but nothing is destroyed.

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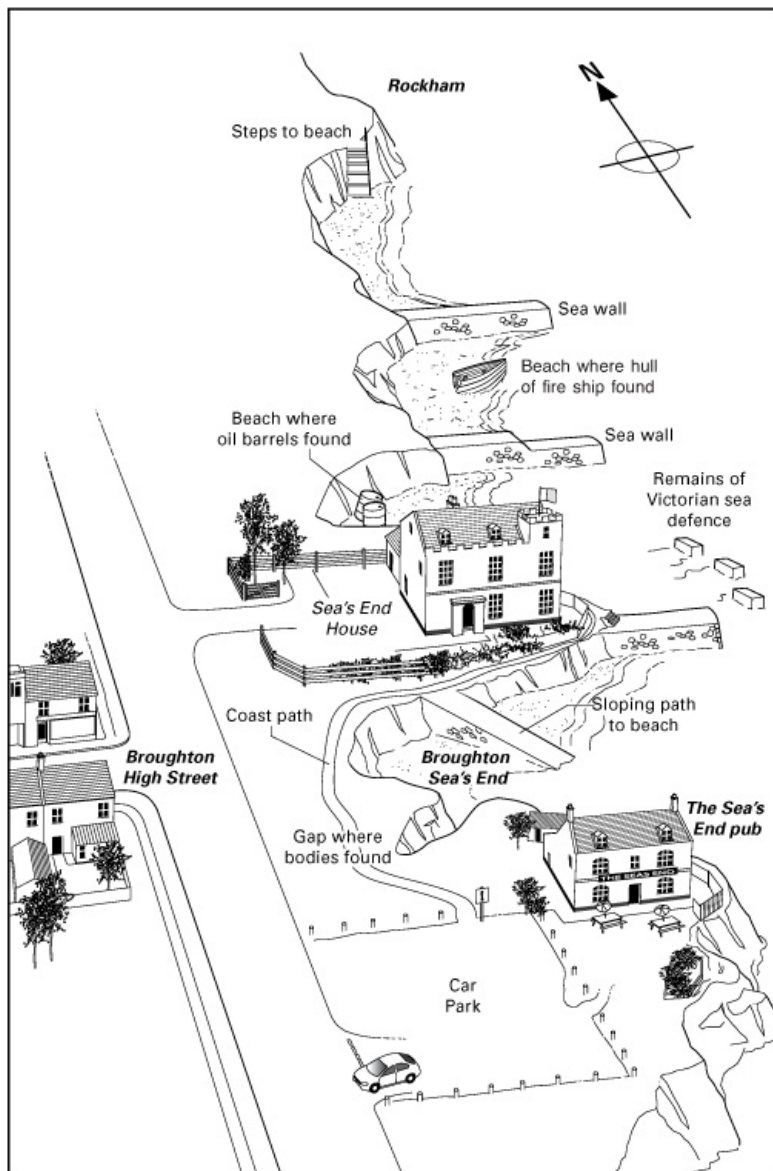
There are, as far as I know, no Roman remains at Swaffham but there is a wonderful Roman site nearby, at Caister St Edmund. Similarly, though Norwich is rich in wonderful houses, Woolmarket Street is fictional. Norwich Castle does indeed house a magnificent museum but the exhibits I mention are (apart from the teapots) imaginary.

Thanks to Andrew Maxted, Matthew Pope and Lucy Sibun for their archaeological expertise. Particular thanks to Lucy for her insights into life as a forensic archaeologist. However, I have only followed the experts' advice as far as it suits the plot and any resulting mistakes are mine alone. Thanks also to Graham Ranger for his unforgettable description of the 'smell' of crime.

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THE HOUSE AT SEA'S END

For Gabriella, who also avoided Halloween.



PROLOGUE

November

Two people, a man and a woman, are walking along a hospital corridor. It is obvious that they have been here before. The woman's face is soft, remembering; the man looks wary, holding back slightly at the entrance to the ward. Indeed, the list of restrictions printed on the door looks enough to frighten anyone. No flowers, no phones, no children under eight, no coughers or sneezers. The woman points at the phone sign (a firmly crossed out silhouette of a rather dated-looking phone) but the man just shrugs. The woman smiles, as if she is used to getting this sort of response from him.

They press a buzzer and are admitted.

Three beds in, they stop. A brown-haired woman is sitting up in bed holding a baby. She is not feeding it, she is just looking at it, staring, as if she is trying to memorise every feature. The visiting woman, who is blonde and attractive, swoops down and kisses the new mother. Then she bends over the baby, brushing it with her hair. The baby opens opaque dark eyes but doesn't cry. The man hovers in the background and the blonde woman gestures for him to come closer. He doesn't kiss mother or baby but he says something which makes both women laugh indulgently.

The baby's sex is easy to guess: the bed is surrounded by pink cards and rosettes, even a slightly deflated balloon announcing 'It's a girl'. The baby herself, though, is dressed in navy blue as if the mother is taking an early stand against such stereotyping. The blonde woman holds the baby, who stares at her with those dark, solemn eyes. The brown-haired woman looks at the man, and looks away again quickly.

When visiting time is over, the blonde woman leaves presents and kisses and one last caress of the baby's head. The man stands at the foot of the bed, pawing the ground slightly as if impatient to be off. The mother smiles, cradling her baby in an ageless gesture of serene maternity.

At the door, the blonde woman turns and waves. The man has

already left.

But five minutes later he is back, alone, walking fast, almost running. He comes to a halt by the bed. Wordlessly, the woman puts the baby into his arms. She is crying, though the baby is still silent.

‘She looks like you,’ she whispers.

CHAPTER 1

March

The tide is out. In the early evening light, the sands stretch into the distance, bands of yellow and grey and gold. The water in the rock pools reflects a pale blue sky. Three men and a woman walk slowly over the beach, occasionally stooping and looking intently at the ground, taking samples and photographs. One of the men holds something that looks rather like a staff, which he plants into the sand at regular intervals. They pass a lighthouse marooned on a rock, its jaunty red and white paint peeling, and a beach where a recent rock fall means that they have to wade in the sea, splashing through the shallow water. Now the coastline has transformed into a series of little coves which appear to have been eaten out of the soft, sandstone cliff. Their progress slows when they have to clamber over rocks slippery with seaweed and the remains of old sea walls. One of the men falls into the water and the other men laugh, the sound echoing in the still evening air. The woman trudges on ahead, not looking back.

Eventually they reach a spot where the cliff juts out into the sea, forming a bleak headland. The land curves away sharply, leaving a v-shaped inlet where the tide seems to be moving particularly fast. White-topped waves race towards jagged rocks and the seagulls are calling wildly. High up, on the furthest point of the cliff, is a grey stone house, faintly gothic in style, with battlements and a curved tower facing out to sea. A Union Jack is flying from the tower.

‘Sea’s End House,’ says one of the men, stopping to rest his back.

‘Doesn’t that MP live there?’ asks another.

The woman has stopped at the far side of the bay and is looking across at the house. The battlements are dark grey, almost black, in the fading light.

‘Jack Hastings,’ she says. ‘He’s an MEP.’

Although the woman is the youngest of the four and has a distinctly alternative look – purple spiky hair, piercings and an army surplus jacket – the others seem to treat her with respect.

Now one of the men says, almost pleadingly, 'Don't you think we should knock off, Trace?'

The man holding the staff, a bald giant known as Irish Ted, adds, 'There's a good pub here. The Sea's End.'

The other men stifle smiles. Ted is famous for knowing every pub in Norfolk, no mean feat in a county reputed to have a pub for every day of the year.

'Let's just walk this beach,' says Trace, getting out a camera. 'We can take some GPS readings.'

'Erosion's bad here,' says Ted. 'I've been reading about it. Sea's End House has been declared unsafe. Jack Hastings is in a right old two and eight. Keeps ranting on about an Englishman's home being his castle.'

They all look up at the grey house on the cliff. The curved wall of the tower is only two or three feet from the precipice. The remains of a fence hang crazily in midair.

'There was a whole garden at the back of the house once. Summer house, the lot,' says Craig, one of the men. 'My granddad used to do the gardening.'

'Beach has silted up too,' says Trace. 'That big storm in February has shifted a lot of stone.'

They all look towards the narrow beach. Below the cliffs, banks of pebbles form a shelf which then falls steeply into the sea. It's an inhospitable place, hard to imagine families picnicking here, children with buckets and spades, sun-bathing adults.

'Looks like a cliff fall,' says Ted.

'Maybe,' says Trace. 'Let's get some readings anyway.'

She leads the way along the beach, keeping to the edge of the cliff. A sloping path leads from Sea's End House down to the sea and fishing boats are moored higher up, above the tide line, but the sea is coming in fast.

'There's no way off the beach this side,' says the man whose grandfather was a gardener. 'We don't want to get cut off.'

'It's shallow enough,' says Trace. 'We can wade.'

'The current's treacherous here,' warns Ted. 'We'd better head straight for the pub.'

Trace ignores him; she is photographing the cliff face, the lines of grey and black with the occasional shocking stripe of red. Ted plunges his staff into the ground and takes a GPS reading. The third man, whose name is Steve, wanders over to a point where a

fissure in the cliff has created a deep ravine. The mouth of the ravine is filled up with stones, probably from a rock fall. Steve starts to climb over the rubble, his boots slipping on the loose stones.

‘Careful,’ says Trace, not looking round.

The sea is louder now, thundering in towards land, and the sea birds are returning to their nests, high up in the cliffs.

‘We’d better head back,’ says Ted again, but Steve calls from the cliff face.

‘Hey, look at this!’

They walk over to him. Steve has made a gap in the pile of rubble and is crouching in the cave-like space behind. It’s a deep recess, almost an alleyway, the cliffs looming above, dark and oppressive. Steve has shifted some of the larger stones and is leaning over something that lies half-exposed in the sandy soil.

‘What is it?’

‘Looks like a human arm,’ says Ted matter-of-factly.

*

Detective Sergeant David Clough is eating. Nothing new in that. Clough eats almost constantly throughout the working day, starting with a McDonald’s breakfast, moving on through several Mars Bars and a Pot Noodle for lunch, through a sustaining sandwich and cake at tea time before treating himself to a pint and a curry for supper. Despite this, Clough’s waistline is admirably trim, a fact he attributes to ‘football and shagging’. Recently, though, he has acquired a girlfriend, which has cut down on at least one of these activities.

Clough has had a trying day. His boss is on holiday and Clough was secretly hoping that this would be the week when a serial killer stalked Norfolk and was caught personally by super-policeman David, soon to be Sir, Clough. But, instead, he has had two break-ins, one taking and driving away and one old dear found dead on a stairlift. It’s not exactly *Miami Vice*.

His phone rings, blasting out an irritating jingle from *The Simpsons*.

‘Trace! Hi, babe.’

Detective Sergeant Judy Johnson, who is (under protest) sharing a desk with Clough, makes gagging motions. Clough

ignores her, ingesting the last of his blueberry muffin.

‘Dave, you’d better come,’ says Trace. ‘We’ve found some bones.’

Clough leaps into action, grabs his phone and dives for the door, yelling for Judy to follow him. The effect is slightly ruined by the fact that he has forgotten his car keys and has to come back for them. Judy is still sitting at the desk, stony faced.

‘What do you mean “follow me”? You don’t outrank me.’

Clough sighs. It’s typical of Judy to raise objections and ruin their only chance of action this week. Ever since she was promoted last year she’s been getting above herself, in Clough’s opinion. Okay, she’s a good enough cop but she’s always picking him up on detail – a piece of paperwork left undone, a date missed, a phone call unrecorded – paperwork never solved a crime, Clough tells her in his head, though not in person; Judy is fairly formidable.

Now he tries to fix his face into an imitation of the boss at his most impatient.

‘Human bones found at Broughton Sea’s End. We’d better get going pronto.’

Still Judy doesn’t move.

‘Where were they found? Exactly?’

Clough doesn’t know. He was too busy swinging into action to ask questions. He glowers.

‘Was that Trace on the phone? Did she find them?’

‘Yeah. She’s doing some sort of survey of the cliffs and what have you.’

‘An archaeological survey?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is they’ve found some bones, human remains. Are you coming or are you going to ask questions all day?’

*

Sure enough, by the time that they arrive at Broughton Sea’s End, the tide is coming in and it’s too dangerous to go down onto the beach. Clough shoots Judy a reproachful look which she ignores completely.

Trace and Steve are waiting for them at the top of the cliff, near the entrance to Sea’s End House. The sea has reached the

bottom of the sloping path, the waves breaking with a smack against the stone. On the far side of the cove, the cliffs rise up, dark and straight, cut off now by the tide.

'You were a long time,' Trace greets Clough. 'Ted and Craig have gone to the pub.'

'Irish Ted?' says Clough. 'He's always in the pub.'

Judy gets out her notebook and double checks the time before writing it down. Clough is finding her incredibly irritating.

'Where exactly did you find the bones?' she asks.

'There's a gap in the cliff,' says Steve. 'A sort of ravine.' He's a wiry weather-beaten man with grey hair in a pony-tail. Typical archaeologist, thinks Clough.

'How did you find them?' asks Judy.

'I was investigating a rock fall. I moved some of the bigger stones and there they were, underneath. The soil was probably dislodged by the landslide.'

'Are they above the tide line?' asks Judy. Across the bay, the first waves are breaking against the foot of the cliffs.

'At present we think they're protected by the debris from the rock fall,' says Trace.

'Spring tide though,' says Steve. 'It'll be a high one.'

'If we clear away the rocks and dig a trench,' says Trace, 'the sea'll get them for sure.'

They watch as the water advances, incredibly quickly now, joining rock pools together, submerging the sea walls, turning the little bay into a churning pool of white.

Trace looks at her watch. She hasn't made eye-contact with Clough since he arrived; he doesn't know if she is pissed off with him for being late or just in professional, archaeologist mode. It's a new departure for him, going out with a career girl, much less a girl with punk hair and a pierced tongue who wears Doc Martens. They met when Trace was involved with another case involving archaeologists and buried bones. Clough remembers how strongly he felt drawn to Trace from the very first when he saw her digging, her thin arms quilted with muscles. Even now he still finds the muscles (and the piercing) incredibly sexy. For his part, he just hopes that the six-pack compensates for the fact that he hasn't read a book since he got stuck halfway through *Of Mice and Men* for O-Level English.

'Are you sure they were human bones?' Judy is asking.

‘Pretty sure,’ says Trace. She shivers slightly. The sun has gone in and the wind is rising.

‘How old?’

‘I don’t know. We’d need Ruth Galloway to have a look.’

Trace, Clough and Judy exchange looks. They all have their own memories of Ruth Galloway. Only Steve does not react to the name. ‘Isn’t she the forensics girl? I thought she’d left.’

‘She was on maternity leave,’ says Judy. ‘I think she’s back at work now.’

‘Should be at home looking after her kiddie,’ says Clough, rather ill-advisedly.

‘She’s a single mother,’ snaps Trace. ‘Presumably she needs the money.’

‘How did you come to be on the beach?’ asks Judy hastily.

‘We’re doing a survey for the university on coastal erosion. We’re surveying all the north-east Norfolk beaches. We’ve made some interesting finds as well. Palaeolithic hand axe at Titchwell, a Roman bracelet at Burgh Castle, lots of shipwrecks. Steve was examining the cliffs here when he saw the rockfall. The bones were in the gap behind. It looks like they were buried fairly deeply but the earth got dislodged when the stones came down.’

‘How come you’re discovering these things?’ asks Judy, as they walk back along the cliff path. ‘If the sea’s advancing, wouldn’t it cover everything up?’

Clough is glad she has asked this. He’d wanted to but was scared of looking stupid in front of Trace.

‘Tides change,’ says Trace shortly. ‘Sand gets moved; parts get silted up, other parts uncovered. The pebbles get pushed further up the beach. Things that were buried become exposed.’

‘Like our bones,’ says Steve. ‘They may have been buried well above the tidal line but the water’s getting closer, it’s wearing the earth away. Then part of the cliff came down on top of them.’

‘Did you get a good look at them?’ asks Clough.

‘Not really,’ says Steve. ‘Tide was coming in too fast. We didn’t want to get stranded on the wrong side of the beach. But, just at a glance, I’d say we were looking at more than one body.’

Clough and Judy exchange glances. ‘Definitely human?’

‘In my humble opinion, yes.’

‘We found something else too,’ says Trace, whose opinions are never humble.

They have reached the pub. Its sign, which, rather tactlessly, shows a man falling off a cliff, creaks in the gathering wind. They can see Ted through the window, raising a pint to his lips. In the yellow light from the window, Trace holds out something that looks a bit like loft insulation, a small ball of fluffy, yellowish fibres.

‘What is it?’ asks Judy.

‘Cotton wool?’ suggests Clough.

‘Whiffs a bit,’ says Steve. There is, indeed, a strong sulphuric smell coming from the material.

‘Fantastic,’ Clough rubs his hands together. ‘The boss is going to love this.’

‘Where is Nelson anyway?’ says Trace.

‘On holiday,’ says Clough. ‘Back on Monday. He’ll be counting the days.’

Judy laughs. Nelson’s dislike of holidays is a byword at the station.

CHAPTER 2

Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson is sitting by a pool with a glass of beer in his hand, thinking dark thoughts. It is evening and fairy lights, strung in the trees, are twinkling manically in the still water. Nelson's wife Michelle is sitting beside him, but she is carrying on an intense discussion about highlights with the woman at the next table and has her back turned. Michelle is a hairdresser so this is her area of expertise, and Nelson knows better than to expect a pause in the monologue. His own area of expertise – murder – is less likely to prove a promising starting point for conversation.

When Nelson informed Michelle that he had a week's holiday still owing, she suggested that they go somewhere 'just the two of us'. At the time, he had quite liked the sound of this. Their eldest daughter, Laura, had left for university in September and their seventeen-year-old, Rebecca, was unlikely to want to spend an entire week with her parents. 'Besides,' said Michelle, 'she won't want to miss school.'

Nelson had grunted sceptically. Rebecca hardly ever seemed to go to school, her life as a sixth-former apparently consisting entirely of mysterious 'free periods' and even more mysterious 'field trips'. Even her A-Level subjects are incomprehensible to Nelson. Psychology, Media Studies and Environmental Science. Psychology? He's seen enough of that at work. Every so often his boss, Gerry Whitcliffe, will wheel out some weedy psychologist to give him an 'offender profile'. The upshot of this always seems to be that they are looking for an inadequate loner who likes hurting people. Well, thanks and all that, but Nelson reckoned he could have worked that out for himself, with no qualifications except a lifetime in the police force and an O level in metalwork. Media Studies seemed to be another name for watching TV, and what the hell was Environmental Science when it was at home? It's about climate change, Michelle had said knowledgeably, but she couldn't fool him. They had both left school at sixteen; as far as higher education was concerned, their children had entered a different world.

Nelson had fancied Scotland, or even Norway, but he had to

use up his week before the end of March and Michelle wanted sun. If you don't go for long haul, the only sun in March seemed to be in the Canary Islands, so Michelle had booked them a week's full board in a four star hotel in Lanzarote.

The hotel was nice enough and the island had a strange ash-grey charm of its own, but for Nelson the week was purgatory. On the first night, Michelle had struck up a conversation with another couple, Lisa and Ken from Farnborough. Within ten minutes, Nelson had learnt all he had ever wanted to know about Ken's job as an IT consultant or Lisa's as a beautician. He learnt that they had two children, teenagers, currently staying with Lisa's parents (Stan and Evelyn), that they preferred Chinese takeaways to Indian and considered George Michael to be a great all-round entertainer. He learnt that Lisa was allergic to avocados and that Ken had Irritable Bowel Syndrome. He learnt that Lisa went to Salsa on Wednesdays and that Ken had a golf handicap of thirteen.

'How many children do you have?' Lisa had asked Nelson, fixing him with an intense short-sighted stare.

'Three,' said Nelson shortly. 'Three daughters.'

'Harry!' Michelle leant forward, gold necklaces jangling. 'We've got *two* daughters, Lisa. He'll forget his own name next.'

'Sorry.' Nelson turned back to his prawn cocktail. 'Two girls, nineteen and seventeen.'

Only once, in the course of the evening, did the conversation falter and die.

'What do you do for a living, Harry?' asked Ken.

'I'm a policeman,' answered Nelson, stabbing ferociously at his steak.

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'Thank God,' said Nelson to Michelle when they got back to their room. 'We'll never have to talk to those God-awful people again.'

'What do you mean?' asked Michelle, wrapping herself in a towel and heading for the shower.

Nelson hesitated before answering; he didn't want to piss her off too much as he was counting on first-night-of-the-holiday sex.

'Well, we haven't got a lot in common with them, have we?'

'I liked them,' said Michelle, turning on the water. 'I've asked

them to join us for crazy golf tomorrow.'

And that was it. They played golf with Lisa and Ken, they went sightseeing together, in the evenings they ate at adjoining tables and once, in a night of unparalleled awfulness, they had visited a karaoke bar. Hell, muses Nelson as he sits listening to the relative merits of gold versus red with a hint of honey, can hold nothing worse than singing 'Wonderwall' in a duet with a computer programmer from Farnborough.

'We must get together another time,' Ken is saying now, leaning towards Nelson. 'Lees and I were thinking of Florida next year.'

'We've been to Disneyland Florida,' says Michelle, 'when the girls were younger. It was great, wasn't it Harry?'

'Grand.'

'Well, time to go again without the kids,' says Ken. 'Why should they have all the fun eh?'

Nelson regards him stonily. 'Harry's a real workaholic,' says Michelle. 'It's hard to get him to relax.'

'Must be a stressful job, being a policeman,' says Lisa. She'd said the same thing, with variations, whenever his job was mentioned.

'You could say that,' says Nelson.

'Harry's had a tough year,' says Michelle, in a sympathetic undertone.

You could say that, too, thinks Nelson, as they finally leave the poolside restaurant and repair to the lounge for coffee. Last year had produced two child-killers, at least three madmen and a curious relationship, the like of which he had never known before. Thinking about this relationship, Nelson stands up suddenly. 'Going to stretch my legs,' he explains. 'Might give Rebecca a quick call too.' Mobile phone reception is better in the open air.

Outside, Nelson walks around the pool twice, thinking of crimes with which he could charge Ken. Then he retreats into the darkness of the 'Italian Terrace', a rather desolate area full of empty urns and artistically broken columns.

He clicks onto Names and scrolls down the Rs.

'Hallo,' he says at last. 'How are you doing?'

Dr Ruth Galloway is, in fact, doing rather badly. Phil, her Head of Department at the University of North Norfolk (UNN), had insisted on holding a planning meeting at five o'clock. As a result, Ruth was late at the childminder's for the third time that week. As she screeches to a halt in front of the terraced house in King's Lynn, she can't help thinking that her name is now on some mysterious blacklist of Bad Mothers. The childminder, a comfortable older woman called Sandra, found after much exhaustive interviewing and reference checking, is understanding. 'Doesn't matter, love. I know how it is when you're working,' but Ruth still feels guilty. She never knows quite how to talk to Sandra. She's not exactly a friend but she's not a student or another academic either. She once heard one of the other mothers (Sandra looks after two other children) having a chat with Sandra in her kitchen, all about her husband and his untidiness, about her other children refusing to do their homework or eat their greens. It sounded so friendly and comfortable, Ruth longed to join in. But she doesn't have a husband or any other children. And her job as a forensic archaeologist, specialising in long-dead bones, is hardly conducive to cosy kitchen chats.

As soon as four-month-old Kate sees Ruth, she starts to cry.

'That always happens,' says Sandra. 'It's relief at seeing Mum again.'

But as Ruth struggles to get Kate into her car seat, she can't detect any relief or even affection in her crying. If anything, she just sounds plain angry.

Kate was a big baby. Long rather than heavy. 'Is your partner tall?' one of the midwives had asked, putting the red-faced bundle into Ruth's arms. Ruth was saved from having to answer by the arrival of her parents, hot-foot from Eltham, bearing flowers and a copy of *Baby's First Bible Stories*. Her mother was meant to have been with her during the birth but contractions had started during a Halloween party hosted by Ruth's friend and sometime druid, Cathbad.

Cathbad, wearing white robes to honour the good spirits, had accompanied Ruth to hospital. 'First babies take ages,' he had assured her. 'How do you know?' Ruth had shouted, rent by pain which seemed both unbearable and continuous. 'I have had a daughter,' said Cathbad with dignity. 'You didn't have her,' Ruth yelled, 'your girlfriend did.' Cathbad had ignored Ruth's yelling,

swearing, and assertions that she hated all men and him in particular. He had scattered herbs on her, walked around the bed muttering incantations, and finally had just held her hand.

‘She’ll be hours yet,’ said the midwives cheerfully. But Kate had been born at ten minutes past midnight, thus avoiding Halloween and arriving in time for All Saints’ Day.

‘I don’t hold with all that Catholic nonsense,’ said her mother, when Ruth informed her of this fact. Ruth’s parents were both Born Again Christians and considered that they alone of all denominations knew The Truth – a delusion which, as Ruth could have told them, they probably shared with every religious cult since the Assyrians first started burying bits of pottery alongside their ancestors, just to be on the safe side.

When Ruth had looked down at her daughter’s furious little face, she had been surprised by a rush of recognition. Whatever she had expected, it wasn’t this. The books had talked about Mother Love, about euphoria and joyfulness and feeding on demand. Ruth was too exhausted to feel euphoric. She wasn’t even sure if, at that moment, what she felt was love. All she felt was that she knew her baby: she wasn’t a stranger, she was Ruth’s daughter. That feeling carried her through the agonies of breast-feeding (nothing like the bucolic descriptions in the book), through the loneliness that engulfed her as soon as her parents had left, through the sleepless nights and zombie-like days that followed. She knew her baby. They were in this thing together.

Her mother had been pleased with the choice of name. ‘Short for Catherine, just like your Auntie Catherine in Thornton Heath’. ‘It’s not short for anything,’ Ruth had retorted, but she found that, increasingly, when she spoke, people tended not to hear. This was a shock for Ruth, who has been a university lecturer for all her working life. People used to pay to listen to her. Now, unless she was talking specifically about the baby, her mouth simply opened and shut like one of those nodding dogs in cars.

Cathbad had also liked the name. ‘After Hecate, the witch goddess. Very powerful magic.’ Her friend Max, an expert in Roman History, had made the same point. ‘Hecate was sometimes called the child nurse, you know.’ Ruth did know, but Kate was not named after Hecate or Auntie Catherine or Santa Caterina of Siena (suggested by a Catholic priest of Ruth’s acquaintance). She was simply Kate because Ruth liked the name. It was attractive

without being twee, strong without being hard. You could hear it prefaced by Doctor or followed by MP. At the same time it was cute enough for a baby.

The future Dr Kate Galloway continues to yell in the back seat as Ruth makes for home. She lives outside King's Lynn, on the North Norfolk coast, not in one of the many picturesque seaside resorts but in an isolated cottage facing a desolate but beautiful stretch of land known as the Saltmarsh. 'You won't be staying in that awful house after you have the baby, will you?' her mother had asked. 'Why not?' Ruth had answered.

She loves the house, loves the view that stretches over the marshes into nothingness, loves the expanse of sky and the sound of the sea, loves the birds that darken the evening sky, their wings turned to pink by the setting sun. But she has to admit that the winter was hard. She spent Christmas with her parents in south London and was only too glad to leave, having had enough of praying before meals and listening to her sister-in-law talk about calories. But when she and Kate were finally home, alone in the little house with the wind roaring in from the sea, she had felt a slight but none the less real stab of fear. They were on their own; they truly were in this thing together. Ruth's cottage is one of three but one house is empty and the other is owned by weekenders who visit less and less often now that their children have grown up. Her nearest neighbours are in the village, a mile away along a dark, exposed road raised up over the flat marshland, and the houses were mostly boarded up for the winter.

Throughout the whole of that January, Ruth and Kate scarcely left the house. Ruth was sustained by Radio 4 (the two episodes of *The Archers* were oases of delight in her day) and by watching Kate. She hadn't realised that a baby would change day by day. One day Kate could smile – she mostly smiled at Ruth's cat, Flint – the next gurgle, and on one joyous occasion she slept through the night. Soon she was greeting her mother with a whole-body wriggle and delighted waving of the legs. This probably saved Ruth's sanity.

When, in February, Cathbad arrived to celebrate Imbolc, the coming of Spring (slightly premature as there was still snow on the ground), he astounded Ruth by asking her when she was going to return to work. Her hermit-like existence had become

her only reality; her world had shrunk to four walls and a computer screen. But when Cathbad mentioned work she realised how much she missed it. She missed her students and her colleagues but most of all she missed the archaeology, the painstaking sifting of evidence, the age-old puzzles of bones and soil, the delight in discovery. Leaving Kate with her friend Shona, who seemed to have bought the whole of Toys R Us for the occasion, she went to see Phil. Then she came home, ordered some work clothes on-line (her pre-baby clothes had become mysteriously tight) and set about weaning Kate onto a bottle. This last task proved so difficult and emotional that it severely tested Ruth's new-found resolve. But she persevered, and by early March she was back at work.

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For years Ruth has been a fan of *Woman's Hour* but it is only now that she begins to see the point of all those features about 'juggling' and the impossibility of 'having it all'. With a little application, it was perfectly possible to put adequate childcare provisions in place. What she hadn't bargained for were the emotions. She felt terrible about leaving Kate, yet when she entered her office for the first time, her own office with her name on the door, she felt a relief so strong that she almost cried (and Ruth doesn't, on the whole, do tears). If she is late to pick up Kate, she feels guilty of almost every crime against humanity. She longs to be with her baby, but when she is she's assailed by a feeling almost of panic. Will she ever escape or will she be trapped in the mother world forever?

Now, she parks her rusty car outside her cottage. The security light comes on, illuminating the overgrown garden and the scrub bushes blown flat by the wind. Kate has fallen asleep and, though this means she probably now won't sleep again before midnight, Ruth is grateful. She carries the car seat into the house and places it in the middle of the sitting room. Flint comes up and sniffs Kate's face. Ruth carries him away. Her mother is full of stories about cats sitting on babies and suffocating them but Flint's attitude so far has been one of detached friendliness and Ruth relies too much on his companionship to suspect him of sinister motives. She feeds him, makes tea and toast for herself and

prepares to enjoy an hour's peace.

The phone rings as soon as she has sat down. It is Nelson.

'Hallo. How are you doing?'

'I'm fine. Where are you ringing from? Are you back?'

A hollow laugh. 'No, I'm still here in bloody Lanzarote listening to the most boring man in the world talk about hard drives.'

'Sounds like fun.'

'You've no idea.'

There is an expensive international pause.

'How's Katie?'

'Kate.'

Impatient grunt. 'Is she okay?'

'She's fine. She's sleeping.' From where she is sitting Ruth can see Kate's little chest rising and falling. Though she no longer checks every ten minutes to see if her daughter is breathing, she still does it every hour.

'How's the childminder? Working out all right?'

'Jesus. You ran a police check on her. Twice.'

'Things can get past those checks.'

'She's fine. Not a murderer or a child molester. Fine.'

There is another silence while they both think of people who turned out to be not quite what they seemed. Ruth has assisted the police on two murder cases, both involving children.

'I'll be home tomorrow.'

But Ruth knows that home does not mean home to her.

'It's very cold in Norfolk,' she says, dampeningly.

'Christ Almighty. It's always cold in bloody Norfolk.'

He rings off and Ruth sits on the sofa thinking complicated and uncomfortable thoughts. When Trace rings and tell her that they have discovered a mass grave at Broughton Sea's End, it's a relief as much as anything.

CHAPTER 3

The next day is Saturday, and at low tide Ruth, Ted and Trace walk along the beach to Broughton Sea's End. Kate has been left with Sandra for the morning. 'It's no trouble,' said Sandra but Ruth feels that it is. Weekdays are all right because that is the arrangement but weekends are an imposition. Ruth also has an absolute dread of asking for favours. She hates ringing up and saying, in that special wheedling voice, 'Can I ask ... would you mind ... you've saved my life ... you're a star.' She'd rather cut the crap and do the thing herself but, as she's finding out, being a working mother means asking for favours. She stumps across the sand in a bad mood.

It is a grey morning. The mist still lingers inland, but at the edge of the sea the air is cold and clear. It's hard going, walking over pebbles and rocks encrusted with tiny, sharp mussel shells. Ted is almost unforgivably breezy for a man who hasn't had a drink yet. He exclaims at unusual rock formations, finds a piece of fool's gold and a coin, worn completely smooth by the sea. He throws floundering crabs back into the water and writes his name in the sand. Trace walks in silence, occasionally taking notes. Ruth finds this rather irritating but she is grateful not to have to make small talk.

As they round the headland, Sea's End House towers above them, grey against the grey sky. With the rest of the coastline hidden by fog, it seems to float out into the sea like a doomed ocean liner, lights blazing as it heads towards the ice-floe.

'Welcome to the end of the line,' says Ted, with undiminished good humour.

Ruth looks up at the cliffs. The stone is sandy, soft and crumbly at the edges where it has been eaten away in bitesized chunks. 'Sandstone,' she says.

'Yeah,' Ted agrees. 'Sandstone all along this stretch. That's why erosion's so bad.'

'There was a sea wall,' says Trace, 'but it disappeared years ago. There are the remains, over there.'

They all look out to sea where, about a hundred yards away, two or three large boulders are sticking out of the water like giant

stepping stones.

‘Trouble is,’ says Ted, ‘most of the defences were built in Victorian times. The cliffs behind them were too steep. When the walls went, there were no banks or anything to slow the tide down.’

‘Should have been fixed,’ says Trace. ‘Even fifty years ago there would still have been time.’

Ted shrugs. ‘It’s global warning, innit? Seas are rising and there’s nothing we can do about it.’ He grins happily as he says this.

Ruth walks towards the cliffs. She can see there has been a recent rock fall, rubble and stone have spilled out onto the beach and the cliff face is streaked black and grey.

‘Round here,’ says Ted.

In the furthest, most inaccessible corner of the beach, there is a gap in the cliff, a narrow cleft running from the coarse grass at the top to the beach below. This has been partly filled with rubble from the cliff fall but Ruth can see where some of the debris has been cleared away. She approaches carefully. ‘Look first,’ her mentor, Erik Anderssen, used to say. ‘Look, then plot, then dig. You will never get that first look again.’ She takes pictures of the cliffs and the rock fall and draws a map in her notebook. Then with Ted’s help she clears away some of the bigger stones. In the narrow space between the two cliff walls, the sand has been worn away, exposing something that looks at first like more stone, smooth and white.

Bones.

Ruth leans forward. She can see at once that there must be several bodies buried here. The bones are piled on top of each other but she can make out at least three thigh bones. Long, sturdy bones, which means the bodies may well be male. There is also a faint smell of rotten eggs. For a moment Ruth feels dizzy, remembering other mass graves, bones white in the sun. She takes a deep breath. She must plot this find, mark where the bodies are lying. ‘Sometimes,’ Erik used to say, ‘the most important thing is the direction.’

‘What do you think?’ comes Ted’s voice.

‘There are several bodies here,’ says Ruth. ‘We need to tell the coroner.’

‘Do you think they’re recent then?’ asks Ted.

‘There’s a good chance they’re recent.’

Ruth thinks that she has seen hair and teeth – signs that the bodies could be fairly modern but, then again, only the year before last she found a perfectly preserved body buried in a peat bog, that turned out to be over two thousand years old. But peat is alkaline, which preserves bone; sand is acidic. Digging on sandy sites, you are unlikely to find human remains because the bones have been eaten away. If these bones, buried in sandy soil, are still in relatively good condition, they may well be modern.

‘Dave said he’d tell the coroner on Monday,’ says Trace in an off-hand voice.

Ruth looks at her curiously. So it’s true that Trace is dating Dave Clough. Rather her than me, she thinks.

‘We should do it today,’ she argues.

‘Isn’t the boss man back on Monday?’ says Ted. ‘Maybe they’re waiting for him.’

‘He’ll be jet-lagged,’ says Trace. ‘Probably won’t be in until Tuesday.’

‘He’s only in Lanzarote,’ says Ruth.

There is a short silence.

Ruth steps over the wall of rubble. The gap between the cliffs is only about a metre wide, getting narrower as it goes back. It is much colder here and the air smells dank. Ruth shivers, and not entirely from the cold. Who would bury bodies here, in this inaccessible spot? She is willing to bet that it wasn’t for any good reason. She has her excavation kit with her but she doesn’t want to do any digging yet. Just look, says the voice in her head. If Trace is right about the tides, when they clear away the rocks this grave site will be destroyed altogether. All the more reason to make proper notes now. The bodies are lying north to south. She thinks that they are in correct anatomical position, stretched out, back-to-back. Taking her trowel, she scrapes away a little of the sand. There are definitely two bodies below, maybe more.

‘How many there?’ asks Ted, peering in.

‘Not sure. At least four.’

‘Four dead bodies, buried fairly recently,’ says Ted. ‘You’d think somebody would have noticed.’

‘Yes,’ says Ruth. She has seen something else, though she doesn’t want to mention it just yet. The bodies are bound, their hands tied behind their backs.

They can't get a signal from the beach so Ruth, Ted and Trace climb the slope by Sea's End House. Ruth is out of breath by the time they have reached the top. She has got her figure back after having the baby, which is a shame – she was rather hoping to get someone else's. Pre-pregnancy Ruth weighed twelve and a half stone, now she is almost thirteen. On the whole this doesn't bother her. She always wears loose dark clothing and doesn't look in mirrors much. What she doesn't like, though, is feeling so unfit, especially as Trace has bounded up the hill like a gazelle and is now punching numbers into her iPhone.

'Cool,' says Ted, indicating the phone.

'It's useful for work,' says Trace defensively.

Ruth, who has never felt the need to have anything more than the most basic mobile phone, looks at her sceptically. Though you wouldn't know it to look at her, Trace comes from a very wealthy Norwich family. Most archaeologists' salaries don't run to iPhones.

However, it seems that even the newest technology is not proof against Broughton Sea's End.

'Not a flicker,' says Trace disgustedly.

'Someone's coming,' says Ruth. A man in a waxed jacket is walking purposefully towards them. Two depressed-looking spaniels run at his heels.

'Take cover,' mutters Ted.

But the natives, it seems, are friendly.

'Can I help?' says the man. 'It's impossible to get a signal here. It really is the land that time forgot.' He manages to say this as if he is rather proud of the fact.

'We're archaeologists,' says Trace importantly. 'We need to make an urgent phone call.'

Ruth can almost see the thought bubble rising from the man's head: how can anything to do with archaeology possibly be urgent? Aren't archaeologists to do with the past – long-dead bodies, ancient artefacts, dusty museums? How can they be standing on his driveway, sea-splattered and panting, talking about urgent phone calls? But whatever the thought bubble says, the speech bubble is polite to a fault. 'You're very welcome to use the phone in the house,' he says. 'Follow me.'

Silently they follow him towards the house. The spaniels trot obediently behind them. Close up, Sea's End House looks more gothic than ever, with grey stone walls, tiny mullioned windows, and a studded oak door more suited to a castle. When this last is pushed open, they enter a vast hall panelled in oak. A stained-glass window reflects pools of green and gold onto the parquet floor and a stag's head stares morosely down at them. Ruth is reminded of a public school (which is surprising as she went to a plate-glass comprehensive). She can almost smell the school lunch – cabbage and overcooked lamb.

'Some place you've got here,' says Ted.

The man smiles rather sardonically and leads them through a door hidden in the panelling, along a stone corridor and into a cavernous kitchen. The servants' quarters, thinks Ruth.

She also thinks that she should be the one to make the phone call but Trace grabs the receiver leaving her and Ted facing their new friend across a kitchen table that would comfortably seat twenty.

'Let me introduce myself. Jack Hastings.'

Jack Hastings? The name rattles around in Ruth's head as she shakes its owner's hand. She is sure she has seen him before. Is he an actor? Someone from the university? The man who does the weather reports on Look East?

Thank God for Ted who always says what he's thinking. 'You're the MP bloke aren't you?'

'MEP,' corrects Hastings smiling.

'I saw you on TV protesting about the French.'

Hastings smiles. He has a charming smile, which is presumably why he uses it so often. 'Well, the English have been protesting about the French for centuries. It's part of a grand tradition.'

Ruth suspects that Hastings enjoys being part of a grand tradition. He's a good-looking man of about sixty, sandy haired and slightly less than medium height. He compensates for his small stature by standing very straight; he is the most upright man she has ever seen, thinks Ruth, noting his chin tilted upwards, his weight on the balls of his toes. He bounces slightly as he faces them across the kitchen, eyebrows raised and even his hair seeming to stand slightly on end.

In the background, Ruth can hear Trace saying 'I'll ask her' and can't help feeling slightly smug. She takes the phone and tells the

coroner that, in her opinion, the bones are probably less than a hundred years old. No, they're in no immediate danger from the tide; yes, the police have been informed. The coroner says that he will issue a permit and excavation work can start on Monday.

When she puts the phone down, Trace and Ted are sitting at the table and Hastings is making tea. Ted grins but Trace avoids meeting her eye.

'I didn't catch your name,' Hastings is saying pleasantly.

'Ruth. Dr Ruth Galloway.'

'Tea, Dr Galloway?'

'Thank you.'

'Milk and sugar?'

'Just milk.'

'Hope you don't mind tea bags. My old ma, she lives with us, insists on making the real thing in a pot with strainer and tea cosy and all that malarkey but I can't be doing with it.'

'I'm all for malarkey myself,' says Ted, in the Irish accent which he sometimes affects.

Hastings laughs heartily. 'Well,' he says, 'are you going to tell me what you've found on the beach?'

Ruth feels inclined to tell him to mind his own business but Trace, wanting to assert herself says, 'We're part of a team researching the effects of coastal erosion on the North Norfolk coast line.'

Jack Hastings' face darkens. 'Don't tell me about erosion.'

We weren't about to, thinks Ruth, but Hastings is off.

'My house is disappearing day by day. Fifty years' worth of erosion in three years. I've lost nearly a mile of land. Every morning I walk out to see how much of my garden has disappeared in the night. Three coastguards' cottages have fallen into the sea. The Martello Tower has gone. The lighthouse is in disrepair. We can't even launch the lifeboat because the ramp just isn't there any more. And what do the council do about it? Nothing. Bloody socialist government.'

From this Ruth deduces that Jack Hastings does not stand in the Labour interest.

'Would cost a ton of money to stop the sea,' says Ted reasonably.

'Yes, but where does it end?' says Hastings, making an obvious effort to speak in a more measured voice. 'Soon the Broads

themselves will be flooded. Norfolk will disappear.'

Ruth thinks briefly how pleased Nelson would be to hear this news. Aloud she says, 'Have you lived here long, Mr Hastings?'

'All my life. My father built the house in the Thirties.'

'Thirties?' says Trace. 'It looks older.'

'No. Art Deco gothic, I'm afraid. Gingerbread? My wife made it, it's very good.' Ruth accepts a piece though Trace refuses with a shudder. It would probably double her calorie intake for the day.

Ruth hopes that the prospect of Norfolk disappearing from the map has taken Hastings' mind off their urgent phone call, but she underestimates the politician. He turns to Trace with another wide smile.

'So what have you found today? A dead body?'

'Four dead bodies actually,' snaps Trace.

There is a silence. Ted leans back in his chair, grinning broadly. Ruth looks daggers at Trace, who ignores her. And, for a second, Jack Hastings' face looks completely blank, wiped clean of all his urbane charm. Ruth notices how pale his eyes are, almost colourless beneath the sandy brows. Then the smile flashes on again and the warmth and animation flood back.

'Four bodies. How extraordinary! Where did you find them?'

'This is a police investigation now,' says Ruth. 'We're not at liberty to say.'

She thinks how like a police officer she sounds – at liberty to say! – she has noticed before how Nelson and co always fall back on these stock phrases. They sound wrong in her mouth somehow.

But Hastings nods understandingly. 'Of course. If I can be any help, though ...'

'You've already been a great help,' says Ruth.

'I've lived here all my life, as I say. Not much about the village that I don't know.'

There is a silence while they all think about the fact that someone seems to have buried four bodies on Hastings' doorstep without anyone apparently being any the wiser.

'Do you know how long they've been there, Ruth?' asks Hastings.

Ruth notes the use of her first name and the fact that Hastings is now deferring to her. She also notes that he has asked the most important question.

‘We won’t know until we’ve excavated the skeletons and run some tests,’ she says.

Hastings jumps on this. ‘So it’s just bones then?’

‘I can’t say,’ says Ruth. ‘The police will be here soon to fence the area off. We’ll excavate on Monday.’

‘Well, feel free to use Sea’s End House as your base,’ says Hastings. ‘Most of the time there’s just me and Stella here now. And Ma, of course. We rattle around somewhat.’

Why don’t you move then, thinks Ruth. Especially in view of the fact that your house is falling into the sea.

‘Children have left home,’ says Hastings, with a rueful smile. ‘Just us oldies and the dogs left.’ He pats one of the spaniels, who looks at him adoringly.

‘How many children do you have?’ asks Ted.

‘Three. Alastair, Giles and Clara. The boys are both married now with their own children. Clara’s the youngest. She’s just finished university. Not quite sure what to do with herself.’

‘Well, tell her there’s no money in archaeology,’ says Ted. Hastings laughs. ‘Oh, Clara wants to save the world. She’s just been out in Africa digging latrines and what have you.’

‘She sounds great,’ says Ruth. ‘We ought to be off now.’

‘There’s no hurry,’ says Trace. ‘The police haven’t arrived yet.’

‘I’ve got to collect my daughter from the childminder.’

She looks up just in time to catch Trace’s expression of amused contempt.

CHAPTER 4

‘Four skeletons you say?’

‘At least four, according to Ruth Galloway.’

It’s Monday and Nelson is back. He has called a team meeting for nine but now his boss, Superintendent Gerald Whitcliffe, has forestalled this by strolling into his office, leaning all over Nelson’s lovely clean ‘to do’ list and ‘having a word’.

‘Just thought you’d like a heads-up, Harry, that’s all.’

Heads up? What the hell does that mean? Sometimes it seems as if he and his boss speak an entirely different language, and not just because Nelson was born in Blackpool and Whitcliffe in Norwich. Still, he’s not going to give Whitcliffe the satisfaction of asking for a translation.

‘Could be a delicate situation, you see.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s right on Jack Hastings’ doorstep.’

Nelson feels he should know the name but he’s not quite in work mode yet. Not that Lanzarote is exactly the other side of the world, even though it felt like it at times. Michelle and Lisa have exchanged addresses and the two families are planning to meet up in the Easter holidays.

‘Who’s Jack Hastings?’

Whitcliffe laughs indulgently. ‘Where have you been hiding, Harry? He’s the MEP who keeps ranting on about his house falling into the sea and the government doing nothing about it. Lives at Broughton Sea’s End, that big castle-type place up on the cliff. Did you see his documentary, *An Englishman’s Home*?’

‘Must have missed it.’

‘Anyway, turns out these bones have been found at the bottom of the cliffs. Just across the beach from Hastings’ place.’

‘What’s the problem? Surely he wouldn’t want to stop us investigating?’

This is said with a slight trace of irony, remembering other influential friends of Whitcliffe’s who have not always been helpful to the police. Whitcliffe doesn’t get it. He never thinks that Nelson is being funny; he just thinks he’s being Northern.

‘Of course not. Just that we have to make sure that we do it all

by the book. Can't afford to cut any corners.'

'I never do,' says Nelson. And now he is being funny.

*

An hour later, Nelson and Clough are driving towards Broughton Sea's End. It is normally the junior officer who drives but Nelson hates being a passenger and Clough likes to leave his hands free for eating so they are in Nelson's dirty white Mercedes, doing seventy along the winding coastal roads.

'So, boss,' says Clough, as the North Norfolk coastline shoots past, blurry and indistinct, caravan parks, pubs, sand dunes, pitch and putt. 'Do you think we've got another serial killer on the loose?'

'I assume nothing,' says Nelson.

'Still,' says Clough hurriedly, fearing another variation on Nelson's 'never assume' lecture, 'seems funny, doesn't it? Four skeletons in one grave. It's an out-of-the-way place, too; cut off by the tide most of the time.'

'We don't know anything yet. Skeletons could be bloody Stone Age.' Nelson has never forgotten the first time that he met Ruth Galloway. He had called her in to investigate a body found at the edge of the Saltmarsh, which he had thought might be that of a child and, in a way, he was right. Except that this child had died over two thousand years before.

'Trace says that Ruth thinks they're comparatively recent,' says Clough.

'Ruth's not always right,' says Nelson.

And when they reach the beach at Sea's End the first person that Nelson sees is Ruth, with the entirely unwelcome addition of a child slung around her neck.

'Why the hell have you brought Katie?'

'Childminder's sick,' says Ruth.

'What were you thinking? It's way too cold for a baby.'

'She's well wrapped up.'

Katie looks like an Eskimo child, thinks Nelson. She is wearing an all-in-one thing with built-in feet and mittens. She is sound asleep.

'I hadn't got time to make other arrangements,' says Ruth.

'What about Shona?'

‘She’s teaching.’

Nelson knows he can’t say any more. Not here. He glares at Ruth and crunches away across the shingle. He doesn’t like this beach; it feels claustrophobic somehow, with the cliffs looming on one side and that monstrosity of a house on the other. He looks across at the turrets of Sea’s End House. Presumably that’s where Whitcliffe’s mate lives. Never trust a man who flies the Union Jack. Everything is so bloody grey – grey stone, grey sea, grey sky. Nelson has a very clear idea of what the seaside should look like, a vision that stays remarkably true to his native Blackpool – sand, big dippers and donkeys. Not this God-forsaken pile of rubble in the middle of nowhere. There’s not even a slot machine, for heaven’s sake.

At the far side of the bay there is an opening in the cliff, a sort of cleft about a metre wide. The mad Irishman Ted is there, clearing stones away with a shovel. Trace is there too, talking into her phone. Nelson sees Clough give her a little wave. Pathetic.

‘Top of the morning to you,’ Ted greets him.

‘Is this where the skeletons were found?’

‘Yes, in this recess. The opening was blocked off by a rock fall. I’ve cleared most of it away now.’

‘We’ve started on the trench.’ Ruth appears next to him. ‘It’s difficult because there’s not much space to dig.’

There is already a neat trench in the narrow gap between the tall cliffs. Nelson looks at it with pleasure. Annoying though archaeologists can be he admires their way with a trench. His scene-of-crime boys could never get the edges that straight. Then he looks closer. The trench appears to be full of bones.

‘Jesus,’ he says. ‘How many in there?’

‘Just the six, I think,’ says Ruth. She leans over and Nelson looks anxiously at Kate, suspended in her baby sling. How safe were those things anyway ... ?

‘Any idea how old the bodies are?’ he asks.

‘I think they’re fairly recent,’ says Ruth. ‘Bones buried in sand usually disappear after a few hundred years.’

Not for the first time, Nelson marvels at what archaeologists consider recent. ‘So they could be a hundred years old?’

‘I think it’s likely they’re more modern than that,’ says Ruth cautiously. ‘We’ll do C14 dating. Also there’s hair and teeth. We

can run a number of different tests.'

Nelson knows from previous cases that C14, or carbon fourteen dating, measures the amount of carbon left within a body. When we die we stop taking in carbon 14 and it starts to break down so, by measuring the amount of C14 left in a bone, archaeologists can estimate its age. He also knows that dates can vary by as much as a hundred years. This may not seem much to Ruth but it's not very helpful when deciding whether or not you're dealing with a recent homicide.

'Anything else?' asks Nelson, straightening up.

'Bodies appear to be adult male, well-built ...' She pauses.

'They're bound, back to back. One has what looks like a bullet wound in the thoracic vertebrae, another looks as if he was shot in the back of the head.'

'Natural causes then,' says Clough, who is hovering in the background

Trace laughs but Nelson glares furiously at his sergeant. Murder is no laughing matter, whether it occurred twenty, seventy or two thousand years ago.

'What will you do now?'

'We'll expose all the skeletons, then we'll draw and photograph them in situ. Then we'll excavate, skeleton by skeleton. They should all be done on the same day.'

'You can't dig with a baby round your neck.'

'I can supervise.'

'Give her to me.'

'What?'

'Give the baby to me. Just for a bit. I'll sit in the car with her, it's too cold out here.'

The wind has picked up in the last few minutes. They can hear the waves crashing on the beach and sand blows around them. Kate stirs fretfully.

'She probably needs feeding,' says Ruth.

'Well feed her and then leave her with me. Just for a bit.'

'Jesus, boss,' says Clough. 'Are you setting up as a nanny now?'

'Just for ten minutes,' says Nelson. 'Then it's your turn.'

*

Ruth's first reaction is one of intense irritation, followed by an

almost blissful sense of release. As Nelson carefully lifts Kate out of her sling, it is as if Ruth has her old body back, her old self back. She straightens up, feeling the gritty wind full on her face, her hair whipping back. She knows she is smiling.

Kate has had almost a full bottle of milk, her eyelids are drooping. Nelson sits with her in the front seat of the Mercedes, Clough watching open-mouthed from the passenger side.

‘She should go to sleep now,’ says Ruth.

‘If she doesn’t, Cloughie’ll sing her a lullaby,’ promises Nelson.

Kate’s head rests against Nelson’s blue waxed jacket. Her fine dark hair, with its one whorl that never goes in the same direction as the rest, suddenly looks unbearably fragile.

‘I’ll get back to the excavation,’ says Ruth, not moving.

‘Don’t hurry back on our account,’ says Nelson, who is still looking down at Kate.

Ruth finds herself almost running back along the cliff path. She can’t wait to get down to the beach and start work on the trench. She wants to assert her authority on the proceedings, to check that the skeleton sheets are properly filled in, that there is no mixing of bones, that everything is securely bagged and labelled. But, more than that, she wants to be involved. It is over six months since she did any practical archaeology. She knows that Trace thinks that she is using Kate as an excuse not to do her share of the hard work, to ‘supervise’ instead. Ruth is the expert here, she’s entitled to sit back and delegate, but Trace will never know how much Ruth wants to dig, to forget everything in pure physical hard work. She would not have admitted it, but by the time she looks down at the bodies stretched out back-to-back in their sandy grave she has almost forgotten that she has a baby.

The trench is still fairly narrow and Ruth squeezes in with difficulty. Ideally, she’d like more time to look at the context but she knows that the sea is advancing. High tide is at six, and with the stones cleared away the sea will probably come all the way into this inlet. Time to excavate the bodies. First she takes photographs, using a measuring rod for scale. Then she draws the skeletons in plan. Finally, bone by bone, she starts on the first body. As she lifts each bone, Trace records it on the skeleton sheet and marks it with a tiny number in indelible ink. All the bones are present and, as Ruth had thought, there are teeth too; each tooth also has to be numbered and charted. When she comes

to the skull, she sees that there is some hair still attached, ashblond, almost the same colour as the sand.

There are fragments of rope around the wrists.

Ted whistles. 'Their hands were bound.'

'May be able to get DNA from the rope,' says Ruth. 'There could be blood or sweat on it.'

'Will we get DNA from the bones?' asks Ted.

'Maybe,' says Ruth. 'But DNA can be contaminated by burial.'

Trace says nothing. She is working efficiently but silently, placing each marked bone in a paper bag.

Ruth looks at the skeleton sheet. She is sure that the bodies are adult males. She can see the brow ridges on the skulls, the pronounced nuchal crest at the back of the head, the large mastoid bones. This first skeleton also has a particularly square jaw. Ruth wonders whether they will be able to get a facial reconstruction done but, as she looks at this skull lying on the tarpaulin with sand blowing around it, she has an uneasy feeling that she knows exactly what its living form would be. A tall man (the long bones show that), blond haired with a jutting chin. A Viking, she thinks, though she knows this is historically unlikely. She thinks again of her first mentor – Erik Anderssen, Erik the Viking.

'How are you doing?' She recognises Clough's voice but does not look up.

'Okay. First body's almost out.'

'Baby's asleep,' says Clough, sounding amused. 'Think the boss is about to drop off too.'

Ruth says nothing but Trace says, slightly bitchily, 'Never knew Nelson was so soft about babies.'

'Well, he's got kids of his own, hasn't he,' says Ted, carefully lifting out the second skull.

'They're grown up now,' says Clough. 'Turning into right stunners.'

Ruth wonders whether Ted has children. She knows very little about him beyond the fact that he went to school in Bolton and is famous for his prodigious drinking. She also thinks it is inappropriate for Clough to refer to Nelson's daughters, one still at school, as 'stunners'. She wonders what Trace thinks.

The second body is slightly shorter and the few tufts of hair are dark. When they reach the hands they see that an index finger is

missing.

‘Could be very useful, that,’ says Ted.

Ruth agrees. She is almost sure these men were killed within living memory. If that is the case, a distinguishing mark will be very useful.

The next body is laid out in an identical position, hands behind the back. The only difference is that something is clasped in the right hand, its skeletal fingers still clenched.

‘What’s that?’ Ted leans in.

Gently Ruth prises the fingers apart. Still they seem unwilling to give up the object they have grasped for so long. A flash of gold, white beads.

‘Is it a bracelet?’ asks Trace.

‘It’s a rosary,’ says Ruth.

She has seen one before, of course. A picture comes into her mind of Father Hennessey, the Catholic priest she met while investigating another long-buried body. She has a vivid memory of a ruined house, a deserted garden, an archway silhouetted against the sky and Father Hennessey holding a rosary, passing it from one hand to the other, his lips moving. Father Hennessey’s rosary was black and ornate. This is smaller and simpler, white beads on a gold chain, a cross at one end.

‘May be able to trace that,’ says Trace.

‘Nah,’ says Ted. ‘Those things are ten a penny.’

Ruth puts the rosary into a separate bag.

‘It’s all evidence,’ she says.

They can now see the lower bodies, which are lying on what looks like a white sheet. On the sheet are some tiny balls of fluff. Ted bends closer.

‘Looks like the stuff we found the other day. Smells the same too.’

‘We can try to identify the material,’ says Ruth. ‘It’ll help with dating.’ She stands up, easing her back. Her earlier euphoria is overtaken by a sudden wave of tiredness. She’s out of practice at digging. Her neck and shoulders feel as if she is wearing an iron collar. Also the trench is starting to feel claustrophobic, the cliffs lowering over her with the triangle of sky above.

Ted is watching her. ‘Why not let Trace take over for a bit?’ He leans forward. ‘It’d be good practice for her.’

She smiles at Ted, grateful for his tact. He grins back, showing

two gold teeth. She climbs out of the trench, being careful not to damage the sides, and Trace takes her place.

Ruth walks back across the beach, noticing that white-flecked waves are starting to appear on the horizon. They *must* keep a watch on the tide. She climbs the slope and walks slowly along the cliff path to the car park. Nelson's filthy Mercedes is parked by an ominous-looking sign saying 'Beware! Danger of Land Slides'. The car window is half open and, through it, Ruth sees Nelson, head back, eyes shut, Kate nestling on his shoulder. For a moment, she just stands there. She has only once before seen Nelson asleep and she remembers how his face is completely changed, the fierce lines softened, the eyelashes surprisingly long, the mouth unguarded and vulnerable. Kate's head is pressed against Nelson's neck. From reflex more than anything, Ruth reaches in to see if Kate is breathing. Still asleep, the baby turns her head away. Nelson's eyes open immediately.

'Ruth. Bloody hell. You made me jump.'

'Sorry,' says Ruth.

Nelson winds down the window. 'I wasn't asleep,' he says defensively.

'It's okay,' says Ruth. 'I won't tell Clough.'

'How are you getting on?'

'Okay. Four bodies almost excavated.'

'Think you'll get done today?'

'I hope so.' She looks at the sky which is a pale, wintry blue, the sun high and hazy. 'It's only midday now. High tide should be at six, and we'll have to have it done by then otherwise the trench will flood. We've cleared away the rubble from the cliff fall, you see. Nothing to stop the sea getting in.'

'What are you going to do with Katie? She can't stay here all day and I've got to get on.'

'She can sleep in her car seat for a bit.'

'What if she wakes up?'

'I'll sit with her.'

Nelson looks at Ruth without saying anything. Kate stirs slightly and he readjusts his hold, his hand looking very large against her little back. Ruth finds herself staring at Nelson's wedding ring. Has he always worn one?

'Shall I take her?' she asks.

'Perhaps you'd better.'

Ruth opens the car door and Nelson climbs out. He places the sleeping baby in Ruth's arms and tucks her blanket carefully round her. Ruth looks at Kate to avoid looking at Nelson as he does this.

'She's beautiful,' says Nelson softly.

'Don't.'

'I can't help it, Ruth. I've hardly seen her before today.'

Whose fault is that, thinks Ruth. But she knows she isn't being entirely fair. Nelson has asked several times if he can see Kate, but so far Ruth has always made excuses. She's tired, she's got a cold, I'm tired, I'm working. Nelson has a right to see Kate but there is only so much she can take.

She keeps her eyes down, fiddling with Kate's blanket. 'Can I see her again?' asks Nelson. His voice seems to come from a long way away.

'Sure,' says Ruth. 'Cathbad's talking about having a naming ceremony. You and Michelle can both come.'

This time she looks up and meets Nelson's eyes. Dark eyes, more black than brown, eyes that he has passed on to Kate.

'Thanks,' says Nelson. Then he turns away and strides off along the cliff path, towards the excavation.

CHAPTER 5

By sunset, all six skeletons have been excavated. The carefully logged bones, packed in boxes marked 'Pathology', are waiting to be winched up the cliff by Ted and Craig. The tide is almost upon them. Trace, standing higher up the beach, is up to her ankles in water. Sly little waves are lapping at the edges of the trench. The sea is blue in the setting sun yet Sea's End House, high on the cliff, is already in darkness. Ruth is in the trench, getting a last look before the sea destroys it. Examining the context in which a body is buried – the earth filling a grave and any objects (glass, fibres, animal bone, coins, pottery) found within that earth – is central to a forensic archaeologist's work. In normal circumstances Ruth would spend days in the trench taking soil samples, making detailed plans and drawings, but now she knows that in five minutes the whole area will be full of salty water and any remaining clues will be lost forever. She remembers the dig ten years ago when Erik discovered the wooden Bronze Age henge on the Saltmarsh beach. Every day, Erik had had someone on 'tide watch'. Even so, Peter, Ruth's ex-boyfriend, had nearly died when, with terrifying swiftness, the sea had flooded the marshland, leaving him cut off from the others. Erik had saved him. One good deed to set against other, darker, actions. Ruth hopes that this was taken into account when Erik faced his maker. Not that she believes in any such thing, of course.

'Better hurry, Ruth,' shouts Trace, looking at the path where the waters are now swirling and foaming. 'We've got to wade across the beach before it gets too deep.'

'Okay.' Ruth takes a last photograph. 'A grave is a footprint of disturbance,' she tells her pupils; the natural layers destroyed, soil and stones churned up together, vegetation growing differently. Someone dug this hole deliberately and, judging from its position, they hoped that it would never be found. If she had more time she might be able to tell exactly which digging implement was used, but now all she can do is note the way that the strata have been sliced through: the 'grave cut' it's called. She bags some soil and a few fragments of wood and glass, worn smooth by sand and sea. She has already removed what may prove to be their most

significant find – a single bullet. Then she climbs, rather awkwardly, out of the trench.

The last box is being hauled up the cliff, swaying wildly in the wind as the two men pull on the ropes. Ruth squints up at the dark shape, strangely reluctant to leave until the last skeleton has left its resting place. ‘Come on!’ yells Trace. There is only a thin line of pebbles left, and in places the waves are already pounding against the rocks. Trace and Ruth run along the narrow strip of land, hugging the cliff, trying to dodge the waves. As they reach Sea’s End House, they have to wade out to the stone jetty. Trace surges ahead, creating a wake in the churning water. ‘Jesus,’ she shouts, above the noise of the sea. ‘It’s deeper than it looks.’

They have an anxious few minutes, struggling against the surprisingly strong undertow. The wind sounds loud and angry and it is nearly dark. Twice Ruth almost loses her footing. She can feel water seeping unpleasantly over the tops of her wellingtons. She should have worn waterproof trousers. She tries not to think that the reason she didn’t was because they make her look like a Michelin man and she knew that she would be seeing Nelson.

At three o’clock Ruth had rung Shona who had finished teaching for the day. Shona drove over and collected Kate, taking her back to her house in King’s Lynn. Ruth trusts Shona (up to a point) but she also knows that the nearest her glamorous friend ever comes to motherhood is weekend visits from her married lover’s children. She hopes she won’t take Kate for a McDonald’s.

Wiping the wet hair from her eyes, Ruth sees that Trace has reached the path. Without checking to see if Ruth is all right, she runs up the slope towards Sea’s End House, slapping her pockets for her iPhone. Ruth climbs slowly out of the icy water, her trousers now drenched almost to her thighs. She looks back. Across the bay, in the car park, she can just make out Ted and Craig loading the boxes into a van. Clough is there too. She can see his reflective jacket. Nelson has not come back. On the beach, the sea has reached the inlet and waves rush joyfully into the narrow cleft between the rocks. The grave of the six men has been destroyed. Water covers the beach, the biggest waves breaking against the cliffs with a sound like smashed glass.

Ruth walks slowly up the slope. She is desperate to get back to Kate but she has to check that all the finds are accounted for. In

the car park her Renault is beside the plain white police van. Ted and Craig are shutting the double doors. Clough is watching. A little way apart Trace is talking into her phone. Clough catches Ruth's eye. 'She loves that thing more than me.'

Ruth hasn't usually got much time for Clough, whom she regards as the worst sort of sexist, racist Neanderthal policeman, but something in his expression touches her. She is also surprised to hear him use the word 'love', even facetiously. Can the famously commitment-phobic Clough really have fallen at last?

Ruth smiles. 'I'm sure she doesn't.'

Clough shrugs, looking rather rueful. 'Bone boxes are in the van. Post-mortem's set for tomorrow, nine o'clock.'

'Does Nelson know?'

'He said to say he'd see you there.'

'Thanks.' Ruth has a last few words with Ted before heading back to her car. Clough calls after her. 'Look after that baby of yours. She's a little star.'

Wonders will never cease, thinks Ruth as she drives off into the night. Kate has turned her into a nervous wreck and Clough into a human being. Whatever will she accomplish in the next four months of her life?

*

The first thing that Ruth hears as she approaches Shona's house is the sound of crying. More than crying; this is screaming, wailing, the sound of a banshee in full-throated howl. The neat terraced house seems almost to be pulsating with the noise. Ruth runs up the path but Shona has opened the door before she reaches it. A scarlet-faced monster squirms in her arms.

'I'm sorry, Ruth. I've tried everything. Lullabies, classical music, ride-a-cock-horse. The lot. She's been at it for nearly an hour. I think she must be ill or something.'

Ruth reaches out her arms for Kate who takes a deep breath, leans into her mother's neck and instantly falls asleep. The silence feels immense, far more than mere absence of sound.

'My God.' Shona sounds both awed and rather resentful. 'All she wanted was her mum.'

'She's probably just cried herself to sleep,' says Ruth, speaking gruffly to hide how she feels. This has never happened before.

Secretly she has never felt before that she is any better than anyone else with Kate. It is her mother, comfortably upholstered and full of maternal authority, or Sandra, who have seemed like the real experts. Ruth may feel that she knows Kate but she has never been sure that the compliment is returned. Until now.

Juggling Kate with what now seems to be practised ease, she follows Shona into the sitting room. The normally stylish room bears the signs of Shona's struggle to placate the baby. A half-full bottle of milk rolls on the polished wood floor and CDs of suitably soothing classics lie scattered over the sofas. The TV is showing some primary coloured children's programme and an open bottle of wine sits on the coffee table.

Shona follows Ruth's glance. 'Didn't even have time to get myself a glass.'

Ruth doesn't comment on the fact that Shona has been drinking while in charge of her baby. It's her fault, her lack of contingency planning, that has led to Shona having to cope with a screaming baby all afternoon and she's grateful – if slightly worried at the urgency with which Shona now grabs a glass and fills it to the brim.

'Do you want some?' asks Shona as an afterthought.

'No thanks. I've got to drive.'

'I'll make you a cup of tea,' says Shona, not moving.

'It's okay,' says Ruth. 'I ought to be going.' She starts to arrange Kate in her car seat, an unnecessarily complicated device bought for her by Cathbad.

'How was the dig? Things looked pretty busy when I left you. What did you find?'

Ruth looks over her shoulder at Shona, who is sitting cross-legged in an armchair, her bright red hair falling over her eyes. In the past she has had reason to distrust Shona's interest in her work but she feels that she, or Kate, owes her something, information at the very least.

'Six skeletons,' she says. 'They look comparatively recent.'

'Good God, Ruth,' says Shona, sounding almost amused. 'Are you going to be mixed up in another murder?'

'I wasn't exactly mixed up in the last one,' says Ruth with asperity. 'Unless you count a madman trying to kill me.'

'I would definitely count that.'

'Well, in this case, I've simply been called in to examine the

bones. Look at how they've been buried and so on.'

'Mmm.' Shona looks unconvinced. 'I saw the mad Irishman there,' she says. 'And that purple-haired bitch. Anyone else from the university?'

Ruth looks curiously at Shona as she struggles with the last strap. Shona also works at the university, teaching English, but for the last year she has been having an affair with Ruth's boss, Phil. Just before Christmas, much to everyone's surprise, Phil left his wife for Shona. Ruth isn't sure if Shona herself wasn't rather shocked by this development. Certainly she hasn't rushed to move Phil into her house. He is renting a flat nearby 'while the kids get used to the situation'. Presumably Shona knows a good deal about the workings of the archaeology department. Ruth wonders why she dislikes Trace so much.

'Steve and Craig from the field team,' she says. 'I thought Phil might look in.'

'Oh, he had a meeting with some sponsors,' says Shona vaguely.

'How are things?' asks Ruth, not sure that she really wants to know. She gets on all right with Phil, he's a decent enough boss, but that's as far as it goes. He's very much the new style of archaeologist, obsessed with technology and appearing on television. Ruth has always got the impression that Phil regards her as a throwback, an expert in her own field but a grafter, a plodder, not someone suited to the centre stage. Which suits her fine. Their working relationship works. She just doesn't particularly want to get to know Phil in his new guise as her best friend's partner.

'Oh, all right,' says Shona, twisting a strand of hair between her fingers. 'His wife's being a cow.'

'Well, it must be difficult for her,' offers Ruth. 'They were married for ... how long?'

'Fifteen years. But it hadn't been working for the last five.'

Not for the first time, Ruth wonders how Shona, who is, after all, an astute literary critic, can be so gullible when it comes to men. Who says the marriage hadn't been working for the past five years? Phil, presumably. Ruth has met Phil's wife, Sue, at various department functions over the years and the couple always seemed perfectly comfortable together. They have two children, boys, who must be teenagers by now.

‘Fourteen and twelve,’ says Shona, in answer to Ruth’s question. ‘I get on brilliantly with them.’

Ruth can believe that this is true. She imagines Shona, with her beauty and vivacity, utterly charming the two boys. Whether the infatuation, on either side, will last, is another matter.

Ruth picks up Kate’s bottle, blanket and the various stuffed toys that have become strewn around the room. Shona makes no move to help her, just stays curled up in her chair, sipping her wine. She obviously feels that her work is done and, really, Ruth agrees with her.

Ruth stuffs the last toy in the nappy bag and says, ‘Thank you, Shona. I’m sorry you had such an awful time of it.’

‘That’s okay,’ says Shona, not denying that it was awful. ‘Any time.’

‘I’m praying Sandra will be better tomorrow,’ says Ruth.

*

Driving home across the Saltmarsh, she thinks about her friendship with Shona. They met when Ruth first started working at the University of North Norfolk, but they only really got to know each other on the henge dig. When Ruth looks back to that time – Erik’s ghost stories around the camp fire, the smell of peat smoke in the morning, the wind whistling through the rushes at night, the unforgettable first sight of the henge, black against the blue-grey sand – she thinks of Shona, her red hair flying out behind her as she ran over the sand dunes like a sea sprite shouting ‘It’s here! The henge is here!’ Shona had been Ruth’s first real friend in Norfolk and Ruth values her friends highly. Ever since adolescence, when her parents retreated into the church, putting their relationship with God, it seemed, above their relationship with her, Ruth has relied on her friends for support. She has never been one for the gang. She is bemused by her students, with their hundreds of friends on Facebook or Bebo. Are these real friends, people who would look after your cat or drive you home from hospital, or are they just an amorphous mass, happy enough to leave cute messages (lol!) on your wall but completely removed from your everyday life? How can you have three hundred close friends?

Ruth has always preferred just two or three. Alison and Fatima

at school, Caz, Roly and Val at university, Josephine Dumbili from that holiday in Crete. And now Shona. As, over the years, Fatima, Caz and Val acquired husbands and children (Roly is gay and Alison determinedly single in New York) they seemed to move, inexorably, further away from Ruth and she relied more and more on Shona, who sometimes seemed her only ally in a world of motherhood, family holidays and smug Round Robins at Christmas ('This year Ellie joined Sophie and Laura at the grammar school'). When she found out that Shona had been lying to her for years, ever since the henge dig in fact, the betrayal hit Ruth hard. But her need for Shona was too strong and their friendship mended itself, not quite as strong as before but pretty resilient all the same. Ruth hopes it can withstand Kate, who seems a force more powerful than ten hurricanes, and that scary two-headed beast called Shona-and-Phil.

She is nearly home. The road is raised up over the flat marshland; at night it seems as if you are driving into nothingness, isolated, vulnerable, a prey to the winds that thunder in from the sea, 'direct from Siberia,' as the locals always say with pride. Ruth turns on the radio and Mark Lawson's fruity voice fills the car, telling her about an experimental play that she has never heard of and will never see. Thank God for Radio 4. Ruth prays that Kate will stay asleep and maybe (wonderful thought) sleep all the way through the night. Surely she must be exhausted after all that screaming?

When she gets to her cottage, she carries Kate in, opening and shutting the door soundlessly. She knows from experience that, though Kate can sleep through any amount of radio programmes about experimental drama, the smallest unexpected sound will wake her up. She once cried for half an hour after Ruth sneezed. She lifts Kate out of the car seat and carries her carefully up the steep staircase. 'You can't have a baby in that house,' her mother had said, 'the stairs are a death trap.' But Ruth successfully negotiates the hazard and lays Kate down, still fast asleep, in her cot. There is a spare room but it is tiny and full of junk so, at present, she and Kate are roommates, a situation which she can see lasting until Kate is about eighteen.

The phone rings as Ruth is switching on the baby monitor. She races downstairs to stop the dreadful clamour. Her ears strain to hear if Kate has woken up but there is silence from the bedroom.

'Yes?' whispers Ruth into receiver.

'Ruth. It is I. Tatjana.'

Of all Ruth's friends, the very last one she expected.

*

July 1996. Bosnia. The hottest summer on record. Ruth flew to Srebrenica as part of a team from Southampton University, led by Erik. They stayed in what had once been a four-star hotel but had been bombed so badly that the top three storeys had been destroyed. The remaining rooms were a nightmarish mix of erstwhile luxury and recent necessity. Camp beds were ranged, four deep, in the ballroom, the chandeliers, miraculously undamaged, swayed crazily in the wind that blew through broken window panes and ripped-up floorboards. On the stairs the red carpet was ripped and, in some cases, charred and bloodied. The double doors in the lobby had been replaced with corrugated iron, most rooms had at least one window broken, and in the Grand Dining Room the Red Cross had set up a medical base where starving women and traumatised children waited on spindly gilt chairs and viewed their scared reflections in floor-length mirrors.

'The Shining,' said one of Ruth's colleagues, as soon as he saw the pock-marked corridors of The Excelsior, and the joke stuck. 'He-ere's Johnny,' the archaeologists would say, returning to the ballroom at night and making grotesque shadows in the light from the oil lamps (there was no electricity or hot water). One of the doctors, Hank from Louisiana, perfected a Jack Nicholson impression so lifelike that the Bosnian interpreter screamed whenever she saw him.

Thinking back, Ruth doesn't really remember feeling scared, though a lot of the time she was. She remembers more adolescent emotions: feeling left out (the other volunteers were all older than her and veterans of disaster scenes), feeling unsure, lonely and, above all, uncomfortable. She will never forget, though, her first sight of the graves in Srebrenica. So many bodies, contorted, grinning, arms and legs twisted over one another. The bodies on the surface decomposed quickly in the hot sun but lower down, below the water table, they found men, women and children miraculously preserved. The heat and the stench were almost

unbearable. They spent days in those hellish pits, exposing body after body, using trowels, spoons and even chopsticks to pick up every minute fragment of bone. 'Lose one tooth or even a foot bone,' one of the anthropologists used to say, 'and you're an accomplice to the crime.'

There were tensions too. The authorities just wanted the graves exhumed as quickly as possible but the archaeologists wanted to identify as many of the dead as they could. 'To know our dead,' declared Erik, 'is a fundamental human right. It is why the Egyptians built pyramids and the Victorians built mausoleums, why even the most primitive man buried his ancestors in a sacred place alongside his pots and spears.' But the War Crimes Tribunal did not want to know about the Egyptians or the Victorians, they simply wanted the evidence recorded and the guilty brought to justice. 'But who is guilty?' Erik would say at night in the ballroom, the lamplight glinting on his long, silver-blond hair. 'In war it is the victor who writes the history.'

Tatjana had been one of the interpreters, but it soon emerged that she had a degree in archaeology from an American university so she joined the forensics team. Ruth was drawn to her from the first. Tatjana was quiet but composed. She wasn't scared to make her opinions known and Ruth admired that. She was attractive too, with straight dark hair cut in a fringe and large brown eyes. Ruth and Tatjana began spending time together, working side-by-side in the field by day, and at night, they moved their sleeping bags to a quieter corner of the ballroom, away from the American group with their guitars and games of spin the bottle.

Despite this, Ruth didn't know very much about Tatjana. She came from Trebinje, near the Adriatic coast. It was rumoured that she'd lost her husband in the siege of Mostar but, then, almost every Bosnian had lost someone. You stopped asking after a while and just assumed tragedy. Certainly, in repose, Tatjana's face sometimes looked unbearably sad but she had a reserve that prevented anyone from getting too close. Ruth didn't mind this. She was a private person herself and disliked it when people asked probing questions in the name of friendship.

So, she was surprised, and rather pleased, when Tatjana suggested one evening that they go for a picnic. She remembers that she had laughed. The word picnic conjured up images of

cucumber sandwiches and grassy meadows, not this nightmare land where the rolling fields usually turned out to be full of human bones rather than checked tablecloths and cupcakes. But Tatjana had 'borrowed' a jeep from one of the militia (she could always get round the soldiers) and she had a bottle of wine. What could be nicer? There was a pine forest on the edge of the town. Ruth had never been there, it was on the Serbian border and there were bandits in the hills, as well as the more picturesque dangers of bears and wolves.

'It'll be fine,' Tatjana had said. 'Where's your sense of adventure?'

Where indeed? Ruth rather felt that she'd used up her quotient of adventure in volunteering for Bosnia in the first place. But the idea of being outdoors on a summer evening, of sitting on the grass and talking about Life, was too good to pass up. So Tatjana drove the jeep up to the forest and the two girls did indeed sit on the grass, drinking wine from the bottle, and talking about archaeology, Erik, careers, men, the state of the world. Ruth remembers that she was just feeling pleasantly sleepy and, for the first time that summer, almost relaxed, when Tatjana said, 'Ruth. Will you do me a favour?'

Ruth will never forget the way that Tatjana's face had become transformed, how it blazed with light. How she suddenly looked both incredibly beautiful and incredibly scary.

'Of course,' Ruth said nervously. 'What?'

'I want you to help me find my son.'

CHAPTER 6

The coroner, a horrendously cheerful man called Chris Stephenson, speculates that the bodies have been in the ground no longer than a hundred years. Ruth makes no comment on this. She has her own research to conduct on the bones. She will measure and analyse, looking for evidence of disease or trauma. She'll send samples for Carbon 14 and DNA testing. She will do isotopic tests on the bones and teeth. Yet, even with all this technology, she still thinks identification is unlikely. If the bodies have lain in the earth all that time, why should anyone claim them now?

Stephenson agrees with Ruth that the bodies are male, aged between twenty-one and fifty (no signs of arthritis or typically ageing conditions, all adult teeth fully erupted) and that cause of death was probably gun shot. On four bodies there were entry and exit wounds which suggested that the men had been shot in the back of the neck, 'execution style,' Chris Stephenson explained jovially. The bullet found in the grave was from a .455 cartridge, the type used in a Webley Service revolver, a gun used by British soldiers in both the First and Second World Wars.

'Are we looking at something that happened in one of the wars?' asks Nelson as they leave the autopsy room, shaking off the smell of formaldehyde and the humour of Chris Stephenson.

'It's possible,' says Ruth. 'The dates could fit but ... six bodies? How could six soldiers be killed and just buried under the cliff without anyone knowing about it? There'd be records, wouldn't there?'

'Maybe they weren't soldiers.'

'The bodies were military age.'

'Well, we need to find out,' says Nelson, heading across the car park to where his Mercedes is parked beside Ruth's little Renault. 'I'll set Judy Johnson on to it. Get her talking to the locals. Most of them look as if they were alive in the war. The First World War at that.'

'You should talk to Jack Hastings,' says Ruth. 'He says there's nothing about the village that he doesn't know.'

'Good idea,' says Nelson, to her surprise. 'Why don't you come

with me? Seeing as you know him and all? Unless you've got to get back to the childminder?'

'I don't have to collect Kate until five,' says Ruth with dignity.

It is only when she is in the car, hurtling through the Norwich suburbs, that she realises she has walked into a trap.

*

Broughton Sea's End is a tiny village, getting smaller by the year. Of the houses on the seaward side of the road, only Sea's End House, the pub and two coastguards' cottages remain. In places the cliff has retreated to within yards of the road and only a rather inadequate barbed wire fence separates the driver from the sea below. Out to sea, the lighthouse is a sturdy landmark, waves crashing against its steps, but Ruth knows from the internet that the lighthouse has not been operable for over twenty years. Once or twice, a plume of spray breaks right over the cliff, drenching the car. Nelson swears and puts on the windscreen wipers.

'All this salt's murder on the bodywork.'

'That's not exactly what I was worrying about,' retorts Ruth.

'Oh, this road's safe enough,' says Nelson airily. 'It's been here a good few years.'

But so had the other coastguards' cottages, thinks Ruth. And the Martello Tower and the lifeboat ramp. The sea is winning this battle.

They pull up in the car park, near the 'Danger' sign and walk back across the coast road towards the village. It's a tiny place, just one street of houses, a convenience store-cum-post office and, behind them, a church – Norman by the look of its tower. There is not a living soul in sight. The wind whips in from the sea and seagulls call loudly overhead.

'Jesus,' says Nelson. 'Who in their right mind would live here?'

But Ruth rather likes the village. She has no idea why (she was brought up in South London after all) but she is drawn to lonely coastal landscapes. She loves the Saltmarsh with its miles of sand and bleak grassland. And she likes Broughton Sea's End. She likes the shuttered-looking houses, the shop selling fishing nets and home-made jam, the wind-flattened shrubs in the gardens. They walk back along the High Street, cross the road again and set off towards Sea's End House. A solitary dog walker is struggling

along the cliff path.

Something about the walker, or perhaps the dog, is familiar.

‘I think that’s him,’ says Ruth to Nelson. ‘Jack Hastings.’

Sure enough, the man and his dog turn into the drive that leads to Sea’s End House. Nelson hurries to catch up with them.

‘Mr Hastings?’

Jack Hastings turns in surprise. The wind seems to take Nelson’s words and throw them into the air. Hastings puts his hand to his ear.

‘DCI Harry Nelson,’ Nelson shouts. ‘Of the Norfolk police. Could I have a few words?’

Hastings now registers Ruth’s presence. ‘Ruth, isn’t it? The archaeologist?’

Ruth supposes a politician has to have a good memory for names, but she is nevertheless impressed.

‘Dr Galloway is assisting us with our investigations,’ says Nelson, lapsing into police-speak.

‘You’d better come in, then,’ says Hastings politely.

Ruth is interested to note that this time Hastings leads them into a baronial sitting room where vast sofas lie marooned on acres of parquet. Presumably archaeologists deserve the kitchen, but the police count as guests.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ asks Hastings, shrugging off his coat. ‘Tea? Coffee? Something stronger? Keep out the cold?’

‘I’m driving,’ says Nelson. ‘Coffee would be grand.’

Ruth would love ‘something stronger’ but she feels sure that Nelson would disapprove. Not only will she be driving later but she is also going to be operating a heavy baby. ‘Coffee would be lovely,’ she says.

She wonders if Hastings will ring a bell and summon discreetly uniformed staff but he trundles off by himself, accompanied by the spaniel. Ruth and Nelson sit alone, facing a monstrous fireplace built of stones so vast that they could be rejects from Stonehenge. The room has large sash windows which rattle in the wind and French doors opening onto a stone terrace. Beyond the terrace is the sea, iron grey, flecked with white. There’s no fire lit in the massive iron grate and Ruth finds herself shivering.

‘Upper class buggers don’t feel the cold,’ says Nelson, noticing.

‘I must be distinctly lower class then,’ says Ruth.

‘No, you’re middle,’ says Nelson seriously. ‘I’m lower.’

‘How do you make that out?’

‘You went to university.’

‘That doesn’t make you middle class.’

‘It does in my book. My daughter, now, she’s well on her way to being middle class.’

‘Is she at university? What’s she studying?’

‘Marine biology. At Plymouth.’

Ruth does not quite know how to reply to this but luckily the door creaks open and Hastings enters, carrying a tray. He is accompanied, Ruth is surprised to see, by an elderly woman bearing a coffee pot.

‘Let me introduce my mother, Irene,’ says Hastings, putting the tray on a rather ugly brass trolley. ‘She’s in charge of all the tea-and coffee-making round here.’

Certainly Irene seems to take an immense proprietorial interest in making sure that they have all the coffee, milk, sugar, sweeteners that they require. Ruth is quite exhausted by the end of it. She expects Irene to fade away once the drinks are served but the old lady settles into a chair by the window and reaches for a sewing basket placed nearby.

‘Mother loves her knitting’ is Hastings’ only explanation.

‘Mr Hastings,’ says Nelson. ‘I believe you know about the discovery made under the cliffs here?’

‘The four skeletons,’ says Hastings, leaning forward in his chair. ‘Yes.’

‘Six skeletons, in point of fact.’

‘Six?’

‘In confidence,’ says Nelson, noting how much Hastings seems to enjoy these words, ‘the archaeologists think the bodies were probably buried between fifty and seventy years ago. I believe your family has lived in this area for many years. I wondered whether you could remember hearing of any incident in the war. You’d be too young yourself, of course,’ he adds hastily.

Hastings smiles. ‘I’m sixty-five. Born in 1944.’

‘Ever hear of anything strange happening? Any disappearances? In the war perhaps.’

Hastings throws a quick glance at his mother, knitting by the window. A row of plants sits on the window ledge, some in pots, others in more eccentric containers – soup bowls, hats, what looks like a riding helmet.

'I was only one when the war ended, Detective Inspector,' says Hastings. 'My dad was the captain of the Home Guard.'

Ruth has an immediate picture of *Dad's Army*, of Captain Mainwaring and the other one, the butcher, shouting, 'Don't panic!' She starts to smile but then, listening to the wind whistling through the windows, she thinks: I wouldn't have liked to live here in the war.

Nelson asks tactfully, 'Is your father ... still ... ?'

'No. He died in 1989.'

'Is there anyone else still alive who remembers that time? Perhaps your mother?' Nelson looks over at the serenely knitting figure.

'Ma,' Hastings raises his voice. 'The detective is asking about the war.'

'I'm sure you would have been a youngster,' says Nelson gallantly.

Irene Hastings gives them a very sweet smile. She must have been pretty once, thinks Ruth. 'I was a good deal younger than my husband,' she says. 'We were married in 1937, I was only twenty, Buster was forty-four. I had my first child, Tony, when I was twenty-one. Barbara came along a year later. Jack was the baby.'

'Where is your oldest son now?' asks Nelson. He wonders why Jack, 'the baby', has inherited the house over his brother's head.

'He died when he was still in his thirties. Of cancer.'

'I'm sorry,' says Nelson.

'The inspector is asking about the Home Guard,' says Jack quickly, perhaps to deflect attention from the dead Tony. 'Are any of them still alive?'

'The Home Guard were mostly older than my husband. He was forty-six when the war started. He'd fought in the first, of course.'

'Got the MC,' chipped in Hastings. 'The Military Cross.'

'Yes, he got a medal, Jack,' says Irene in a faintly chiding tone, 'but he never forgot the horror of it all.'

'So are none of the Home Guard still alive?' pursues Nelson.

'Well, there were a few young boys. You could be in the Home Guard if you were too young or too old to fight. I'm not sure about Hugh or Danny. Archie's still alive, though. He sends us Christmas cards, doesn't he, Jack? He must have been about sixteen when war broke out. He joined up later, of course.'

‘Archie?’ says Nelson, getting out his notebook. He’s prepared to like Archie; it was his dad’s name.

‘Archie Whitcliffe.’

‘And the other two – Hugh and Danny?’

‘I think Hugh still lives somewhere nearby. I saw him a few years ago, just after his wife died. I don’t think he’s dead though. I always read the *In Memoriam* column in the local paper.’

Cheerful, thinks Nelson. He supposes though, at Irene’s age, the *In Memoriam* column is just a way of keeping up with your friends – Facebook for the over-eighties.

‘Do you remember Hugh’s surname?’

Irene’s face crumples. ‘I’m so sorry, I don’t.’

‘That’s okay. And Danny?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know anything about him.’

While Nelson is digesting all this, the door opens and a girl comes in, this time accompanied by two spaniels.

‘Is Flo’s paw better, Dad?’ she asks and then stops, looking around in surprise.

Hastings is positively beaming. ‘My daughter, Clara,’ he says.

So this is the famous Clara. Ruth knows that Clara has finished her degree (she is the one who wants to change the world) but, otherwise, she would have taken her for a teenager. Clara Hastings is tall, taller than her father, and slim, with thick blonde hair cut in a shoulder-length bob. She is devastatingly attractive.

Hastings introduces Ruth and Nelson. Clara shakes hands politely with Nelson but her face brightens when she hears the word ‘archaeologist’.

‘That sounds fascinating. I’d love to do something like that.’

‘I like it,’ says Ruth guardedly.

‘I’m out of work,’ confides Clara. ‘Dad despairs of me. I’ve got a degree in law but I just don’t want to be a lawyer. All that making rich people richer. I want to do something useful with my life.’

‘What about the police force?’ suggests Nelson, deadpan.

The girl wrinkles her nose. ‘Well ...’

‘Clara’s a real Leftie,’ says her father fondly. ‘She’s against all kinds of authority.’

Clara would get on well with Cathbad, thinks Ruth. Aloud, she says, ‘Are you looking for work? We might have some casual work on one of our spring digs.’

‘Oh that would be great,’ says Clara. ‘In the meantime, I’ll do anything. Dog-walking, gardening, babysitting.’

‘Babysitting ...’ repeats Ruth, thoughtfully.

*

As they leave Sea’s End House, the rain starts. Within minutes they are drenched, buffeted by great wet winds from the sea. As they reach the car park, they see that the lights are already on inside the pub.

‘Have you had lunch?’ asks Nelson. He isn’t wearing a coat and his shirt is sticking to his back but he doesn’t seem cold. He always seems impervious to the elements.

‘I don’t want lunch,’ says Ruth but she is shivering. Her hood has blown back and her wet hair is trickling down her neck.

‘Come on,’ says Nelson, sensing weakness. ‘Just a sandwich.’

‘Okay,’ says Ruth.

The trap is set.

The Sea’s End is a squat, pebble-dashed building. Presumably, on a summer’s day, it’s the perfect place for a glass of white wine or a jug of Pimms. There are tables outside (though the sun terrace has long since fallen into the sea) and there is a spectacular view across the bay. But on a wet March afternoon the place seems dour and charmless. Ruth gets the feeling that, as this is the only pub in the village, the landlord has not tried very hard to keep up with the times. The walls inside are pine-clad, the floor covered with rather dirty lino. The tables are pine too, and sport plastic menus and ketchup bottles. A group of men stand drinking at the bar, watching *Bargain Hunt* on television.

‘Blimey,’ says Ruth, tapping a grooved wall. ‘It’s like being in a sauna.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ says Nelson. ‘I’ve never been in a sauna.’

‘I thought you went to the health club.’

‘For a swim, yes, or to the gym. I don’t go in the *sauna*.’ He sounds horrified.

‘You should try it. In Norway everyone goes in the sauna and then they run outside into the snow.’ As she says this, she thinks of Erik, who had a sauna in the grounds of his Norwegian lake house. She remembers black sky, white snow, naked figures

running laughing through the trees. It had been innocent, she tells herself rather defiantly, a Scandinavian Eden.

‘Rather them than me,’ says Nelson, looking at the menu. ‘What’ll you have?’

‘Oh, just a ham sandwich and a Diet Coke. I’ll buy it.’

‘No, you’re all right.’ Nelson gets up and goes to the bar. Ruth watches him rather warily. The exchange has put her on her guard. The last thing she wants is another row with Nelson over money.

But when Nelson comes back to the table, he doesn’t seem inclined to chat. He checks his phone and then places it carefully on the mat in front of him. Then he moves it to the left of the mat, then to the right, then on top of it, then below, then to the left again.

Ruth can’t stand any more. ‘What did you want to talk about?’

‘Talk?’ He says it like it’s a foreign word.

‘Yes, talk. That’s why you got me here, isn’t it? Why you suggested lunch.’

‘I just thought you might be hungry ...’ Nelson begins, but he has the good grace not to go on. ‘I don’t know, Ruth,’ he says, looking down into his (full fat) Coke. ‘I’m so confused. I think about you and Katie all the time.’

Ruth finds herself breathing fast. ‘Don’t,’ she says. ‘Don’t think about us.’

‘You can’t say that, Ruth. She’s my daughter. I want to help. I want to be involved. I want to give you money, at least.’

There is a pause while the landlord slops their sandwiches down on the table. Ruth tries to speak calmly. ‘I know you want to help but you can’t, can you? If you start giving me money, Michelle will find out. I’ve got to do this thing on my own.’

‘But she’s my—’

‘I know,’ Ruth interrupts. ‘But you’ve got your family. You don’t want to break up your marriage. I respect that. But I’m afraid it means that I make the decisions about Kate.’

Nelson looks as if he is about to explode. The thought of anyone else making decisions is complete anathema to him. But, quite suddenly, all the fight seems to go out of him and he says, in a low voice, ‘I just want to be involved.’

‘You can see Kate any time.’

‘Yes, for half an hour, sitting in my car.’

‘And that’s another thing,’ says Ruth. ‘If you keep offering to look after her, someone will suspect something.’

‘Who?’

‘Judy, maybe. Or even Clough.’

Nelson snorts.

‘Clough’s not stupid, you know. And she does look a little bit like you.’

The look of gratification on Nelson’s face is almost ludicrous.

‘Really? Do you think so?’

‘Well, she’s prettier than you.’

Nelson grins, reluctantly. ‘That’s true. Okay, I’ll be more careful but I can’t help how I feel. I feel protective about her. Like I do about my daughters ... my other daughters. I can’t change that.’

‘You’ll have to try and hide it. Especially when there are other people around. You should have seen Clough’s face when you offered to hold her.’

‘Do him good. He’ll have his own some day. If he ever grows up, that is.’

‘I really think he’s in love with Trace.’

Nelson grunts. ‘Don’t talk to me about love. Even Judy’s getting married. It’s all the girls at the station ever talk about.’

Ruth wondered whether she should take Nelson to task for referring to fellow police professionals as ‘girls’, but she’s far too interested in the news to attempt re-education. Also, she’s glad of the change of subject. Nelson’s probably a lost cause, anyway.

‘Is she? She’s been with her boyfriend a long time, hasn’t she?’

‘Since they were at school.’

‘God, I can’t imagine that.’ Ruth thinks of the boy she was going out with at sixteen, a spotty youth called Daniel Harris. She thinks he became a plumber. He’s probably loaded. Maybe she should have married him.

‘Hen parties, wedding lists. That’s all I ever hear. Even Whitcliffe—’ He stops.

‘What?’

Nelson is silent for a moment, chewing his sandwich. Ruth takes an unenthusiastic bite of hers. It tastes of wet plastic.

Nelson pushes his plate away. ‘Did you catch the name of the bloke in the Home Guard?’ he says. ‘The one who’s still alive?’

‘Archie something.’

‘Archie Whitcliffe. I think he’s my boss’s grandfather. He talked

about him once. Local hero. Fighting on the home front and all that.'

'Will that make things difficult for you?'

'Maybe. Whitcliffe's touchy about his family. He's Norfolk born and bred. Explains a lot, in my opinion. He won't want me bullying his war hero granddad.'

'But you're not going to bully him, are you?' asks Ruth sweetly. 'You're just going to ask him some questions.'

'Whitcliffe thinks I'm too forceful.'

'Why ever would he think that?'

This time Nelson gets it. 'I've no idea. I'm a real pussy cat.'

This makes Ruth think about Flint. She hasn't seen him today. She hopes he's all right and hasn't got shut in somewhere. Since she lost her other cat last year, she's become rather neurotic about Flint.

'Are you finished?' she says. 'I should be getting back to work.'

*

As they drive back through the squalling rain, Nelson asks, 'Do you think we'll get anywhere with identifying the bodies?'

'We might do,' says Ruth. 'I can do isotope analysis.'

'What's that when it's at home?'

'It tests the chemicals and minerals present in teeth and bone. Put simply, the teeth will tell us where someone grew up, the bone will tell us where they ended up.'

'Why's that?'

'Because bone keeps growing. It renews itself, from the inside out. The teeth provide a record of the time that they were formed, the bones will show the chemicals and minerals absorbed more recently.'

'That's good then, isn't it?'

'Yes ...' Ruth hesitates. 'It's just ... we can do the tests, but without the records to cross check it doesn't really help with identification. I suppose if we find out roughly where the men may have come from, we could make enquiries there. The trouble is it's so long ago.'

'People have got long memories,' says Nelson grimly. 'That's one thing I've learnt on this job.'

CHAPTER 7

Nelson drops Ruth at the station and she drives straight back to the university where she has a tutorial at three. The Natural Sciences building is quiet. It's a grey afternoon and most of the students are probably in Halls or in the union bar. Ruth climbs the stairs to her office, thinking about Tatjana and Nelson and Kate and what Jack Hastings' mother meant by 'he never forgot the horror'.

Hearing Tatjana's voice had been a real shock. After Bosnia, Tatjana had moved back to the States and married an American. There had been a few Christmas cards. Tatjana and her husband (Rick? Rich? Rock?) were living in Cape Cod. Tatjana was doing some archaeological work and trying to write a book. Rick/Rich/Rock was a doctor, specialising in geriatrics. 'No shortage in Cape Cod,' Tatjana had written with typical terse humour. That had been almost ten years ago.

'Ruth.' Tatjana had sounded unnervingly the same. 'I had your number from the university. I hope it's okay?'

'It's fine.' The office was not meant to give out personal numbers, but in an age when tutors send their students text messages and communicate via Facebook (not that Ruth would ever do either of these things), nothing was really private any more.

'So you're still teaching?' Tatjana's accent had almost gone, replaced with a slight East Coast whine, but the inflection was still foreign, the ends of each word crisp and emphasised.

'Yes, I'm a lecturer in forensic archaeology. I teach postgraduates mostly.'

'Did you ever write the book?'

'No. Did you?'

'No.' Tatjana's laugh, that sudden staccato bark, brought back the past more vividly than anything else could. The ballroom, the oil lamps, Erik telling stories about vampires, Hank playing 'Smoke on the Water' on the guitar.

'And Erik,' said Tatjana. 'Do you still see Erik?'

'Erik's dead,' said Ruth. 'It's a long story.'

'Erik dead. Dear God.'

‘Yes.’

‘And you, Ruth: What’s your news? Are you married? Children?’

Ruth took a deep breath, watching the flickering green light from the baby monitor. ‘I’m not married but I have a child. A baby.’

Ruth remembers that there was a brief silence before Tatjana said, ‘A baby, well that *is* news. Congratulations, Ruth. A boy or a girl?’

‘A girl. Kate.’

‘Kate.’

Another silence and Ruth could almost hear the years rushing past, a whooshing sound like walking through falling leaves.

‘I’m coming to England,’ said Tatjana at last. ‘I’m giving some lectures at the University of East Anglia. I wondered, could I stay with you? For a week or two?’

Ruth thought a lot of things in that moment: her cottage is a long way from UEA, two weeks is a long time, she would have to tidy the spare room. She thought so long that Tatjana said, ‘Of course, if it’s a problem ...’

‘No,’ said Ruth. ‘No problem. It’ll be wonderful to see you again.’

But will it be wonderful, thinks Ruth, searching for the key card to open her office. Seeing Tatjana will bring back a whole slew of memories, not all of them pleasant. For many years afterwards she’d had nightmares about Bosnia. Bones gleaming in the sun, a hotel with endless corridors, door after identical door, grand staircases leading into nothingness, the flames of a bonfire, Tatjana’s face in the darkness.

The last time she saw Tatjana it had been a harrowing occasion. She still thinks about it, wonders if she could have said or done anything differently, if, by some small change, she could have made events turn out another way. She doesn’t know if, even fourteen years later, she’s ready to revisit that scene. She feels too fragile – not enough sleep, too many confrontations with Nelson. But Tatjana is her friend, and over the last year, she’s learnt a lot about friendship. Tatjana must want to see her badly if she’s made so much effort to get in touch. She mustn’t turn her away. She mustn’t let Tatjana down again.

While she is scrabbling in her organiser bag – it has so many

zips and pockets that it's almost impossible to find anything – she notices that the lights are on inside her office. She pushes open the door and finds Cathbad sitting at her desk, under the poster of Indiana Jones, reading *Alice in Wonderland*.

Although not entirely surprised – Cathbad makes rather a speciality of materialising in unexpected places – Ruth is taken aback to see him there, calm as a Buddha in his lab coat, his long hair in a ponytail, an expression of serene benevolence on his face. Although she sometimes sees Cathbad around the campus (he is a technician in the chemistry department), he rarely comes near the archaeology corridor. He once trained as an archaeologist under Erik and, perhaps for this reason, studiously avoids Phil, Ruth's boss. Certainly no two men could be less alike than Erik and Phil.

'Lewis Carroll,' says Cathbad dreamily, 'such a visionary.'

'I thought he was a paedophile.'

'He was a sad little man who liked the company of young girls. What's wrong with that?'

'Ask Nelson.'

Cathbad smiles. To everyone's surprise, including their own, Cathbad and Nelson get on rather well. Twice they have faced considerable danger together and Cathbad is convinced that Nelson saved his life on one of these occasions. They are bound together by this circumstance, he says, forever. Nelson grunts sceptically when he hears this, but despite a famed intolerance for anything even slightly fey or alternative Nelson finds Cathbad good company. Beneath the New Age trappings is a keen intelligence at work in Cathbad. Nelson sometimes thinks that he would have made a good detective.

'Nelson sees demons everywhere. How are you, Ruthie?'

Ruth is startled. For one thing, it seems like years since anyone has asked about her rather than Kate. For another – Ruthie? Only Erik ever called Ruth Ruthie.

'I'm fine. You look different. What is it?'

Cathbad raises a slightly self-conscious hand to his face and Ruth realises.

'You've shaved off your beard.'

For the past few years, Cathbad has sported a black beard, dramatically at odds with his greying hair. Without it he looks younger, more approachable and, to Ruth's surprise, rather good-

looking.

‘Maddy persuaded me.’

Maddy is Cathbad’s teenage daughter. It’s news to Ruth that they’re in contact. ‘Good for Maddy. It’s a distinct improvement.’

Ruth puts her bag on the visitor’s chair and waits for Cathbad to vacate hers. Instead, he smiles up at her, eyes very dark in his clean-shaven face.

‘How’s Hecate?’

‘Kate,’ snaps Ruth. Jesus, why can’t anyone get her name right?

‘I was thinking that it was about time for her naming ceremony.’

Cathbad has appointed himself Kate’s godfather. Ruth quite likes the idea of godparents (anyone turning up with presents is surely a Good Thing) but has refused to have Kate christened because of the little problem of not believing in God. Cathbad, who likes any opportunity to have a party, has suggested a pagan naming ceremony instead. Ruth doesn’t believe in the pagan gods either but at least Cathbad’s plans don’t involve a church. A picnic on the beach was his last suggestion.

‘Bit cold on the beach,’ she says now.

‘We could have a bonfire.’ Cathbad loves bonfires. He says they are libations for the gods but Nelson is convinced that he is a closet arsonist.

‘You’re not going to start sacrificing goats, are you?’

Cathbad looks hurt. ‘Of course not. It’s a very simple ceremony. We’re just going to show Kate to the gods, that’s all.’

‘Still sounds a bit Wicker Man.’

‘Forget the gods. Just see it as a party to welcome Kate to the world.’

‘That sounds okay, I suppose.’

‘Great. I’ll organise it. Shall we say Thursday week? Are you going to invite your parents?’

‘I don’t think a pagan naming ceremony will be quite their thing somehow.’

‘Are you sure? What about Shona?’

‘She’ll come.’ Shona loves a party almost as much as Cathbad does, and despite a Catholic upbringing she is definitely on the side of the pagans.

‘You’ll have to invite Phil too,’ says Ruth mischievously.

‘They’re together now.’

‘In that case I will invite him,’ says Cathbad with dignity. ‘Even though I find him a rather negative spiritual presence.’

It’s mutual, Ruth wants to tell him. But she doesn’t. Despite everything, she quite likes the idea of a party for Kate. She gives in and sits in the visitor’s chair. Good old Cathbad. He’s been a real support to her over the first few months of Kate’s life. He deserves to be a godparent.

Cathbad’s next words, though, wipe the indulgent smile from Ruth’s face.

‘We’ll have to have Nelson.’

‘Why?’ asks Ruth warily.

Cathbad looks at her blandly. One of the most irritating things about him is that you never quite know what he’s thinking.

‘I see Nelson as a sort of spiritual father to Kate.’

‘Do you?’ Ruth’s heart is beating fast but she keeps her face still.

‘He can be a Guardian. Someone to watch over her.’

‘Nelson’s a Catholic. He wouldn’t come to a pagan ceremony.’

‘He’s not hung up on ritual. He’d come. I’m sure of it.’

That’s what Ruth’s afraid of.

‘We must invite his wife too,’ she says.

‘I’ve only met her once,’ says Cathbad, ‘but she seems a beautiful soul.’

‘She’s very pretty,’ says Ruth drily.

‘I meant spiritually beautiful,’ says Cathbad. Ruth isn’t convinced. For all his high-flown spirituality, Cathbad is susceptible to good-looking women.

‘All right,’ says Ruth. ‘We’ll have a party and a bonfire. Invite all the beautiful people.’

Cathbad smiles and, long after he has left and Ruth is preparing for her tutorial, she still seems to see the smile lingering in the air, like the grin on the face of Lewis Carroll’s famous cat.

CHAPTER 8

A week later Ruth gets the results of the isotope analysis. She rings Nelson immediately but is told, importantly, that he is out 'on police business'. His mobile phone is switched off so she leaves a message and waits impatiently, looking down at the data in front of her, tapping her phone against her teeth. When it rings, she jumps a mile.

'Ruth?' It's Ted.

'Hi, Ted. What's up?'

'We've found something on the beach.'

'What?'

'Some barrels.'

'Barrels?'

'Old oil barrels. They might be linked to the bodies we found. Do you want to come and have a look?'

Ruth hesitates. Nelson could be hours and she doesn't feel ready to settle down to any other work. She has no tutorials this afternoon and doesn't have to collect Kate until five. And she's intrigued; how could some old oil barrels be linked to the six skeletons?

'Okay,' she says. 'I'll come over.'

Ted is waiting for her by the cliff path. It's a beautiful afternoon; sunny but cold, with no wind. The tide is out and the shallow rock pools are a bright, unearthly blue. Ted is rubbing his hands together with what looks like glee but could just be an attempt to get the circulation back.

'This way.'

He leads the way past the jutting headland and onto the next beach. To get there they have to climb over the remains of the old sea wall and Ruth is soon out of breath. Ted rushes on ahead, bounding over the slippery rocks like a goat. Is there such a thing as a sea goat? Ruth pauses on the highest part of the wall, getting her breath back and enjoying the view. In front of her is a perfect picture-postcard bay – white sand, blue sky, seagulls calling – a desert island courtesy of Radio 4. Ted's footprints in the wet sand are like Man Friday's. Ruth could almost believe that no-one has ever been on this beach before. Although it is only a few miles

from resorts like Cromer, this coastline is remote and hard to reach. The cliffs are high and there are no paths or steps. And there's always the danger of being cut off by the tide. The cliffs are dangerous too, full of caves and fissures, overhanging precariously in places. The only creatures at home here are the birds – hundreds of them – nesting on the sheer rock face. Despite living near a bird sanctuary, Ruth is not fond of birds.

A tiny figure on the deserted beach, Craig is clearing away sand with a shovel. He looks like an illustration of an impossible task, one of the labours of Hercules or a punishment in the Underworld.

Another, less classical, allusion comes into Ruth's head, inspired perhaps by Cathbad's championing of Lewis Carroll:

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand.
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand.
'If only this were cleared away,'
They said, 'it would be grand.'

Ruth climbs down from the wall and walks carefully over the rock pools towards the beach. As she gets closer, she sees that, in fact, Craig is clearing the sand away from a large object – several large objects – that lie half-buried at the foot of the cliff. Closer still, she sees that they are oil barrels, orange with rust and studded with limpets.

Craig is red in the face from his exertions. He greets Ruth and Ted with 'Just the three of them, I think.'

'What are they doing here?' asks Ruth, bending close to examine the corroded metal. 'It's such an isolated place. Miles from anywhere.'

'I used to come birds-nesting here as a child,' says Craig. 'We actually used to climb up without ropes or anything. Madness really. The cliffs are eighty foot high in places.'

'I used to go in for extreme archaeology,' says Ted. 'Went into these caves once in the cliffs on the Firth of Clyde. Thirty metres down and full of giant spiders.'

'Fascinating,' says Ruth. She has no time for extreme archaeology, which seems to her to abandon the most sacred

precepts of the subject – time, patience and care – in favour of laddish thrill seeking. ‘Why do you think they could be linked to the bodies?’

‘Take a look inside,’ says Ted.

The nearest barrel has a hole in its side, leaving a wickedly jagged edge. Peering gingerly inside, Ruth smells a heady mix of petrol and the sea. She gags. The barrel is half-full of stones which have either fallen from the cliffs or been swept in by the tide, but the smell is still all-pervasive. The second barrel is also open to the elements and inside, under the stones and beach debris, Ruth can see something whitish. The third barrel, as Ted says, is still sealed.

She puts on protective gloves and reaches inside the second barrel. The stones are tightly packed, a mixture of chalk and flint, with a stray crab leg or two thrown in for good measure (probably dropped there by seagulls). Ruth reaches down as far as she can and manages to get a hold of the something white. She pulls.

‘Let me help,’ says Ted.

Together, they drag out a wad of cotton fibres, once white but now stained grey and yellow, smelling strongly of rotten eggs.

Ruth almost chokes again. She takes a deep breath. ‘It looks like—’

‘The stuff we found buried with the bodies,’ says Ted. ‘That’s what I thought.’

‘The barrel’s full of it,’ says Craig. ‘It stinks to high heaven.’

‘Could be something dead in the bottom of the barrel,’ says Ruth. ‘A fish maybe?’

‘Nah,’ says Ted sniffing knowledgeably. ‘That’s sulphur, that is.’

Sulphur. The word has an ominous sound. Sulphur and brimstone. The devil dancing in front of a yellow fire. Ruth shakes her head irritably. Her parents are big experts on the devil but she doesn’t expect him to come invading her thoughts like this. Especially as he is something else she doesn’t believe in.

The third barrel is still sealed. Ruth pushes at it experimentally; it doesn’t budge but there is a faint sloshing sound.

‘Think it’s full of petrol,’ says Ted.

‘Petrol?’

‘Yeah, the beach stinks of petrol.’

Ruth realises that this is true. Petrol must have leaked

copiously from the first barrel so that the whole area smells like a garage forecourt. Looking down she sees that the sand is black with oil.

‘Well we’d better get the fire brigade to look at it,’ says Ruth. ‘Put some hazard signs up. All we need is some idiot with a cigarette ...’

‘Goodnight Vienna,’ agrees Craig. He starts to pack up his equipment. Ruth likes him; he’s the only archaeologist who doesn’t argue with her.

‘What about the stuff we found in the barrel?’ asks Ted.

‘I’ll take a sample to the lab.’

‘Rather you than me,’ grins Ted.

*

Further inland, overlooking gently rolling hills and flat water meadows, Nelson and Judy are smelling a rather different smell. Antiseptic, lavender and cut flowers masking another, more elemental, odour.

‘Christ, I hate these places,’ says Nelson for the tenth time, shifting impatiently in his chintz armchair.

‘I can’t imagine anyone likes them much,’ says Judy. She is finding her boss rather trying. It’s not her favourite way to spend an afternoon – interviewing some gaga old bloke in an old people’s home – but it’s her job and she has to get on with it. She thinks that Nelson just resents the fact that Whitcliffe has insisted that he attend this rather routine interview. His attitude, as he shifts in the too-low chair, seems to suggest that, if it wasn’t for this intrusion, he would be out catching criminals and righting wrongs. As it is, he’d probably only be in another of Whitcliffe’s meetings.

As for her, she’d be catching up with paperwork and trying not to think about her hen night in two weeks’ time. There’s a notice on the staff room wall for people to sign on and she saw, to her horror, that there were at least thirty names on it. Surely there aren’t thirty women at the station? ‘Oh, people are bringing friends,’ said Tanya, a friend and fellow WPC. ‘The more the merrier.’

Judy is sure that it’ll be very merry. They are starting off in a wine bar, then out for a meal then on to a club. She has asked for

no fancy dress but she's sure there'll be an element of comedy headgear and novelty suspenders. Oh yes, everyone will have a whale of a time. Everyone except the bride herself, that is.

'Would you like to come this way?' a uniformed figure is smiling down at them. She is probably not a nurse but her manner – a crisp mix of kindness and professionalism – certainly suggests a hospital ward. But this isn't a hospital, Whitcliffe stressed that. 'Absolutely super place. Granddad loves it. They play bowls and do gardening. There's even an archery team. Real home from home.'

Greenfields Care Home, as they walk through its cream-painted corridors, is certainly clean and well-organised, but homely? Judy can't imagine anyone wanting to decorate their homes with prints of Norfolk Through the Ages or hand-sanitisers or stairlifts or notices on fire safety. And it doesn't seem terribly like home to have a room with a number, even if it does have your name on it, in cheerful lower case letters.

'Archie? Visitors for you.'

Archie Whitcliffe, who greets them at the door of his tiny room as if he were Jack Hastings himself, looks disconcertingly like his grandson. Superintendent Gerald Whitcliffe is tall and dark, vain about his hair and his suits. Archie Whitcliffe is also tall, though slightly stooped, with immaculate silver hair. He isn't wearing a suit but his cardigan and trousers are freshly pressed and he is wearing a tie, regimental by the look of it.

He shakes hands briskly. 'So you work for Gerald?'

That isn't quite how Nelson likes to look at it, but he nods.

'Yes. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson and this is Detective Sergeant Judy Johnson.'

Archie positively twinkles at Judy. 'What a mouthful. Do you mind if I call you Judy?'

Judy smiles back. 'Not at all.' There's no reason to antagonise the old boy, after all.

The room contains only a single bed, a desk with a television on it, an armchair and a bookcase. As well as the ubiquitous Norfolk print, there are several framed family portraits. Judy cranes her head to catch a glimpse of a teenage Whitcliffe.

'Here,' says Archie obligingly. 'Gerald at his passing out parade.'

Judy looks at the newly qualified policeman, saluting, his neck

vulnerable under the new cap. He looks about twelve.

‘He’s done so well,’ she says. ‘You must be proud of him.’

‘Course I am. Proud of all my grandchildren.’

‘How many do you have?’

‘Ten. Gerald’s the oldest.’

Jesus wept, thinks Nelson. The Whitcliffes are breeding like rabbits. There truly is no help for Norfolk.

Archie sits on the desk chair, gesturing Nelson to the armchair. Judy perches on the bed.

‘Mr Whitcliffe,’ Nelson begins. ‘Superintendent Whitcliffe, Gerald, may have told you about the skeletons found buried at Broughton Sea’s End ...’

‘He has.’

I bet he has, thinks Nelson. Despite the matter being strictly police business.

‘We believe these skeletons are of a group of men who may have died anywhere from forty to seventy years ago. This obviously includes the war years. I wondered if, as a member of the Home Guard, you remember any sort of incident at Broughton Sea’s End.’

Archie is silent for a long time. Along the corridor someone is playing the piano accompanied by some rather weedy singing. ‘If You Were the Only Girl in the World’.

‘You were in the Home Guard,’ prompts Nelson.

‘Yes.’ Archie seems visibly to straighten in his chair. ‘The Local Defence Volunteers we were called at first. I was too young to join up at the start of the war. Did later, of course. Tank Corps.’ He gestures to the tie.

‘There were some other youngsters in the troop, weren’t there?’ Nelson glances at his notes. ‘Hugh and ... er ... Danny.’

‘Yes.’

Nelson wonders if it’s his imagination or does Archie stiffen slightly? He looks at Nelson pleasantly, a calm smile on his face. The tension is in his body which is completely still. Too still, surely?

‘Are you still, in touch with Hugh and Danny? Do you know if they’re still alive?’

‘I corresponded with Hugh a few years ago. I haven’t heard from him since.’

‘Do you have an address for him?’

'I'm sorry, no.' Archie does not bother to go and look. He just stares at Nelson out of bland blue eyes.

'A surname?'

'I don't think I can remember.'

Nelson looks at Judy who leans forward and asks, 'What about Danny?'

'I haven't seen him since the war, my dear. I'd clean forgotten him until you mentioned his name.'

Nelson tries another tack. 'Tell us about the captain of the Home Guard. I believe he was Jack Hastings' father?'

'Yes. Buster Hastings. Hell of a chap. A real old devil, one of the old school. He'd been in the trenches in the first lot, you know. Tough as old boots. Ran a tight ship too. We weren't just playing at soldiers. We did manoeuvres. Night manoeuvres. Patrolled the cliffs. On moonless nights, the *darks* we called them, we went out in the boat.'

'Why?' asks Judy.

Archie's eyes bulge. 'Looking for invaders, of course. We were sure, at the start of the war, we were sure the Nazis were going to come. And Norfolk was the obvious place. All those little coves. So easy to land a boat at night. Hence the manoeuvres.'

'And did you ever see anything?' asks Nelson lightly.

Archie Whitcliffe sits up even straighter. 'If I had, I wouldn't tell you. We took a blood oath, you see.'

*

Ruth, Craig and Ted are in the pub, The Sea's End. Ruth knows by now that any excavation involving Ted invariably ends in the pub. Ruth drinks Diet Coke and the men drink bitter. Everything is the same as on her visit with Nelson – the same men at the bar watching apparently the same TV programme, the same sticky floor, the same laminated menus. The only difference is that instead of feeling nervous and keyed-up she feels relaxed, enjoying the company of her colleagues. Since having Kate, opportunities for drinks with the boys (never her forte anyhow) have been few and far between.

'Have a real drink,' says Ted. 'They do a good bitter here.'

'I can't, I've got to drive.'

'One won't hurt.'

‘And I’ve got to pick up Kate.’

‘Is that your baby?’ asks Craig. ‘How old is she?’

‘Nineteen weeks,’ says Ruth. She wonders if she’ll ever get used to giving Kate’s age in months or even – incredible thought – in years.

‘She’s a darling,’ says Ted, in his Irish voice. ‘Even Nelson seemed taken with her. Not a man much given to sentiment, our Nelson.’

Ruth keeps her face blank. Ted can’t possibly know anything, she tells herself. Keep calm. Keep smiling.

‘Do you know him well?’ Craig is asking Ted.

‘Not really,’ says Ted. ‘We worked with him on another case, didn’t we, Ruth? Got a short fuse, Nelson, but he seems a good copper for all that.’

‘What do you think about this case, Ruth?’ asks Craig.

‘Well,’ says Ruth, not able to resist a tiny twinge of pleasure at having been asked her opinion, ‘I’d say the bodies had been in the ground about seventy years, which brings us to the war years. I think the bones are of men aged between twenty-one and about forty, which makes them military age. I’d say they were soldiers.’

‘We didn’t find any uniform though,’ says Craig.

‘No clothes at all. Just the length of cotton. Maybe it was used to drag the bodies along the beach.’

‘Something fishy definitely went on,’ says Ted happily. ‘Shot at close range, nothing to identify them. Are we thinking Germans or English?’

Ruth thinks she knows the answer to this but, for some reason, she wants Nelson to be the first to know. She stalls. ‘I’ve sent off for isotopic analysis. That should tell us, broadly speaking, where the men were from.’

‘Wonderful thing, science,’ says Ted. Craig smiles.

Archaeologists are divided into those, like Ruth’s boss Phil, who adore science and technology and those who prefer the more traditional methods, digging, sifting, observation. Ted is definitely in the latter camp.

Despite the fact that it is three o’clock in the afternoon, Ted orders a steak and kidney pie.

‘I love a good steak and kidney,’ he says. ‘No-one makes it any more.’

‘I do,’ says Craig. ‘I was brought up by my grandparents so I

can do all the old-fashioned stuff. I've got a mean way with a brisket of beef.'

'My mum used to cook oxtail,' says Ruth, remembering. 'I'm surprised it didn't turn me into a vegetarian.'

'A good oxtail soup is delicious,' says Craig. 'I'll make you some one day.'

There is a slightly awkward pause. Ted raises his eyebrows at Ruth over his (second) pint. Ruth is rather relieved when her phone rings. She goes outside to take the call.

It's Nelson. At last.

'You wanted to speak to me.' He sounds anxious.

'I've had the results of the isotopic analysis.'

'Is that all?'

'What do you mean "is that all?" It's important. The tests show where the men came from.'

'And where was that?'

'Germany.'

CHAPTER 9

When Nelson gets home, he looks at the map emailed to him by Ruth and labelled, bafflingly, 'Oxygen Isotopes Values for Modern European Drinking Water.' When he has made sense of the key he realises that the area pinpointed by Ruth covers not only Germany but parts of Poland and Norway as well. However, most of the region is in Germany, which makes Ruth's a pretty safe bet. Which means that the six men found buried at Broughton Sea's End were in all likelihood German soldiers. Which means that someone shot them at close range and buried them in a place where, without coastal erosion, they would probably never have been found. Which means that Archie Whitcliffe and Dad's Army have a lot of explaining to do. He is definitely hiding something. A blood oath! Jesus wept.

He rings Whitcliffe who, typically, isn't answering his phone. It's six o'clock. Whitcliffe is probably out on the town somewhere. If you can go out on the town in Norwich, that is. Whitcliffe isn't married but Nelson has no idea if he is gay or what his mother would call a 'womaniser'. Tony and Juan, who own Michelle's hair salon, seem to know every gay person in Norfolk and Nelson has never seen Whitcliffe at one of their parties. Not that Nelson often goes to Tony and Juan's parties. It's not homophobia, he explains to Michelle, so much as plain old-fashioned misanthropy. But, gay or straight, Whitcliffe's life outside the force is a closely guarded secret. He's a career officer, a graduate, someone adept at saying the right thing in the right words at the right time. He has nothing in common with Nelson who joined the cadets at sixteen and thinks of himself as a grafter rather than a thinker. Whitcliffe may be a Norfolk boy but to Nelson he seems more of a Londoner – smooth and slightly shift, the sort of person who wears red braces and drinks in City wine bars. But ambitious policeman Gerald Whitcliffe is also the grandson of a man who, in the war, took a blood oath to protect ... what? Who?

Nelson is still brooding on the Whitcliffe family when Michelle comes wafting in from work. She's the manageress of the salon now; it's the sort of place frequented by women who spend their mornings having coffee and their afternoons shopping. On the

rare occasions when Nelson has visited his wife at work he has had to fight his way through shiny Land Rovers outside and designer carrier bags inside. Still, it pays well.

Michelle kicks off her shoes. She always wears high heels for work. Nelson approves. In Blackpool women still dress up for work and to go out in the evening. It's different down south. His own daughters seem to spend all their time slopping about in ridiculous puffy boots. As for Ruth, he can't remember her shoes but he is sure that (unlike the Land Rovers) they bear evidence of mud and hard work.

'Want a cup of tea?' Michelle asks, putting her head round the door of the study (still called the playroom by Laura and Rebecca).

'I should make you one,' says Nelson, not moving.

'Don't bother,' says Michelle, without rancour. 'I'll do it.'

He hears her moving about in the kitchen and is struck by a sudden tenderness for her. They have made this home together – the shaker-style kitchen, the sitting room with its leather sofas and wide-screen TV, the four bedrooms and two en-suite bathrooms. And soon, when Rebecca goes to university, they will be on their own in it. Nelson and Michelle married when he was twenty-three and she was twenty-one. Michelle was pregnant with Laura within six months of the wedding. They have hardly ever been on their own. In Blackpool, when Nelson was working all hours as a young policeman and Michelle was looking after the children, her mother was in almost permanent residence. Nelson hadn't minded. Against all tradition, he likes his mother-in-law, an attractive sixty-year-old with a vibrant taste in sequinned jackets, and he had realised that Michelle needed company. When he was promoted and they moved down to Norfolk (which was *Michelle's* idea, as he is often reminding her) there were always the kids, their friends, other mums, neighbours. The house has never been empty. But now Nelson can hear the leaky tap dripping upstairs and the clink of the cups as Michelle takes them out of the dishwasher. Soon it will be just the two of them.

Nelson follows Michelle into the kitchen, where she is sorting out the post.

'Why don't you ever open letters, Harry?' she asks mildly.

'They're always bills.'

‘They still need opening. And paying.’

Nelson ignores this. Michelle always pays the bills from their joint account. ‘Have you heard from Rebecca?’ he asks.

‘Yes. She’s staying the night at Paige’s.’

‘She’s never here, that girl. Is she going to do her homework at Paige’s house?’

‘Coursework,’ corrects Michelle. ‘I expect so. She’s working very hard, you know.’

Nelson doesn’t know. Rebecca seems to spend most of her time at home watching reality TV or doing something inexplicable called ‘chatting on MSN’. He can’t remember the last time he saw her read a book, but then, he’s not exactly a reader himself.

Michelle has reached the last letter which is encased in a rather eye-catching purple envelope. She holds it up for Nelson’s attention.

‘This is a bit different.’

‘Probably a nutter,’ says Nelson, surveying it with a professional eye.

And, in a way, he’s right.

You are invited, reads the black text on the pale mauve card, *to Kate’s naming ceremony. Place: under the stars. No presents please, just your positive energy.*

‘Kate,’ says Michelle, ‘it must be from Ruth.’

‘Must be.’

‘It doesn’t sound like Ruth. Oh ...’ she turns the card over and laughs. ‘It’s from that mad warlock. Cathbad. He’s the one that works at the university, isn’t he?’

Nelson acknowledges that he is.

‘Well, he’s certainly taking an interest in Kate. Harry, you don’t think ... ?’

‘What?’

‘You don’t think he could be the baby’s father?’

Nelson looks at his wife who is now pouring boiling water into the teapot. She always makes a proper pot, just like his mum does. In her bare feet, her black trousers sweeping the floor, her blonde hair loose, Michelle looks beautiful and rather touching, like a child dressed in her mother’s clothes. But she’s not a child; she’s forty (something she is consciously trying to forget). Has she really never suspected about Ruth? But Nelson knows the answer to this. With an attractive woman’s unconscious vanity, Michelle

would never think of Ruth – overweight, untidy Ruth who thinks more about her career than her waistline – as a potential rival. Michelle likes Ruth but she really hardly thinks of her as a woman. She's one of Nelson's colleagues, like Clough or Judy, not a sexual threat at all.

Michelle hands Nelson a cup. 'Shall we go?'

'Where?'

'To the naming ceremony. Shall we go? Might be a giggle.'

'I don't know,' says Nelson, taking his tea and heading back to the study. 'I'm up to my neck in work at the moment.'

*

Despite repeated attempts, he doesn't get through to Whitcliffe until the morning. He tells his boss that he needs to speak to Archie again, new evidence has emerged which makes him a very important witness, related to the Superintendent or not. But Nelson is too late. His grandfather, Whitcliffe informs him stiffly, died last night, just before midnight.

CHAPTER 10

‘Was he ill?’ asks Clough, rather indistinctly, through a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie.

‘He seemed fine when Johnson and I saw him yesterday,’ says Nelson, swerving to overtake a farm lorry.

‘It’s Johnson, that’s what it is,’ says Clough. ‘She’s a jinx. Remember last year?’

Nelson does, indeed, remember last year, when Judy interviewed a sick old woman with startling, and tragic, results.

‘Maybe he had a heart condition, though,’ says Clough, licking crumbs from his fingers. ‘How old did you say he was?’

‘Eighty-six,’ says Nelson.

‘There you go, then,’ says Clough. ‘Old age, that’s what did it. Mystery solved.’

Was it really as simple as that, wonders Nelson, as he takes the turning for Greenfields Care Home. Old man dies. No mystery, just the expected end of a long life. But eighty-six is no great age these days. His own mother, Maureen, is more active at seventy-four than many people in their thirties. Every day you read about people living to a hundred, or even older. The Queen must be worn out writing all those telegrams. And Archie Whitcliffe, standing proudly in his neat cardigan and regimental tie, had certainly seemed the picture of elderly good health. No-one at the Home had mentioned a heart condition and Archie showed no tell-tale signs of heightened colour or shortened breath. He had been calm and measured, even intimidating. *If I had, I wouldn’t tell you. We took a blood oath, you see.*

But only a few hours after saying those words Archie was dead. He died in his sleep, apparently of a massive stroke. That can happen at any age, Nelson knows, but nevertheless the sequence of events troubles him. That is why he is on his way to the Home, despite Whitcliffe’s thinly veiled discouragement. ‘Might be more respectful to wait a few days.’ Well, Nelson will be respectful, but he knows from experience the value of getting immediate statements. He wants to speak to the last people who saw Archie Whitcliffe alive.

He would have preferred to take Judy rather than Clough but

Judy, much to his disgust, has the day off. 'It was booked ages ago,' says Nelson's PA, Leah. 'I think she's having a wedding dress fitting.' Jesus wept. The station is becoming more like an episode of *Friends* every day (he knows about *Friends* from his daughters). So, as two officers are required and it is imperative to stick to the rules, he has to take Clough and pray that he doesn't give vent to his much-aired views on euthanasia ('after seventy it's kinder').

Clough, however, seems subdued by the surroundings, though when the last person to have seen Archie alive turns out to be an extremely pretty Filipino carer, he cheers up considerably.

The carer is called Maria and her eyes are red from crying. Nelson doesn't know why but he is relieved to see this evidence of human emotion. The owner of the Home, a formidable woman called Dorothy, said all the right things earlier but he had got the impression that Archie's death was primarily an inconvenience to be dealt with as speedily and efficiently as possible. She hadn't been too pleased to see two policemen littering up her entrance hall, either.

'Everything's quite above board,' she said. 'The doctor's signed the certificate.'

'There's no suggestion of foul play,' said Nelson in his policeman voice. 'But Mr Whitcliffe was an important witness in another enquiry. I need to know if he said anything before he died.'

'I'll get Maria. She did Archie's bed call. She was the last person to see him before he passed away.' She gave the impression that it had been in bad taste for Nelson to use the 'd' word.

The bed call turns out to involve helping Archie get into bed. 'Sometimes people need help with toilet,' explains Maria. 'But not Archie. He did everything by himself.'

'In good shape, was he?' asks Nelson. 'For a man his age?'

'He was one of our fittest clients.' Maria's eyes brim with tears. 'That's what makes it so sad.'

Clough pats her arm sympathetically. Nelson gives him a look.

'Miss – er – Maria,' he says. 'If it doesn't distress you too much, I'd like you to go over everything that happened with Archie yesterday. Don't leave anything out, even if you think it's not important. I want to get a complete picture.'

Maria dabs her eyes with a tissue. 'I see him in the morning, just a check call. He is reading.'

‘Reading? A book?’

‘No. I think it was a letter.’

‘Did you have any visitors that day? Apart from DS Johnson and myself.’

‘I don’t think so. I can check the book.’

‘Did he have regular visitors?’

‘His grandchildren come sometimes with their families. Some very sweet little children. They like playing in the garden, feeding the fish. There’s a friend who comes too, an old lady.’

‘Did you ever see the grandson who’s in the police?’

‘No.’

So much for Whitcliffe’s claim that he visits all the time.

‘So, yesterday, you saw Archie in the morning. What time approximately?’

‘About eleven.’

‘When did you see him next?’

‘Not until the bed call. I have some hours off so I can pick up my little boy from school.’

‘What time was the bed call?’

‘Nine.’

‘Bit early for bed isn’t it?’ says Clough.

‘We have so many clients,’ says Maria. ‘We have to start early. Archie was one of the latest because he likes to watch *Panorama*.’

‘Please go on,’ says Nelson, shooting Clough another look.

‘I go in. He is in his pyjamas watching telly. I put his teeth in a glass. Tidy away his clothes, turn down bed.’

‘How did he seem?’ asks Nelson. ‘In good spirits?’

Maria pauses for what seems like a long time. ‘No,’ she says at last. ‘He seem ...’ She stops, searching for the word. ‘Thoughtful. Yes, he seemed thoughtful. Usually we chat, about the telly, about my little boy. He’s five. Archie always remembers him. At Christmas he gives me money to buy him a present.’ She presses the tissue into her eyes.

‘But yesterday he seemed thoughtful ...’ Nelson prompts gently.

‘Yes. I was a bit worried about him so I went back, about half an hour later. His light was still on but he wasn’t reading. He likes to read. Murder mysteries mostly. I buy them for him from the charity shop. But yesterday he was just lying in bed. I thought he was asleep but when I lean over him he grabs my arm. I don’t think he knows who I am. He says a name, sounds something like

Lucy.'

'Something like Lucy?'

'Yes. All morning I'm trying to think.' Her smooth brow furrows. 'I am trying to think of the name.'

'Lucy-Ann?' suggests Clough. 'Lucille?'

'Maybe it wasn't a name,' says Nelson. 'Maybe it was something else, like "lucky".'

Maria shakes her head. 'No, it was a name. I've heard it before.'

'Lucia? Luke?'

'No.' Maria's brow clears and she almost smiles. 'I remember now. Lucifer. He said Lucifer.'

*

'Lucifer,' says Clough. 'Bloody hell.'

They are in Archie Whitcliffe's bedroom, which already has an abandoned feel. The bed is stripped, the pillow gravestone-smooth. On the bedside table, Archie's teeth are still in their glass, next to a copy of *The Nine Tailors*. The family photos still smile down from the walls, but now even the cheerily grouped children seem oddly sad. There is no-one left to look at their forced jollity, no-one except Dorothy and her staff when they clear the room, ready for their next 'client'. Nelson looks out of the window. The grounds are immaculate but empty. A gardener is cutting the grass but, although it is a fine spring day, no-one is sitting in the basket chairs carefully arranged on the patio. Nelson turns back and, as he does so, he notices a yellowing photograph pushed to the back of the desk. Several middle-aged men sit in a row outside a house, a house which looks vaguely familiar. Three much younger men crouch in front of them. At the bottom, in spidery handwriting, is written: 'Broughton Sea's End Home Guard 1940.'

Which was Archie? The gangly boy in front, trying not to smile but obviously delighted to find himself alongside these hardened veterans? The one with his hat at a jaunty angle, gas-mask in hand? Perhaps the serious one with glasses. Which of the older men was Buster Hastings? The scary-looking fellow with the walrus moustache or the fat one with buttons straining? Maybe the one looking vaguely in the wrong direction ... Of course, that must be Sea's End house in the background. He recognises the

grey stone but realises that the picture must have been taken at the back of the house, in the garden that has since fallen into the sea.

Archie's newspaper is still folded back at yesterday's TV. He has ringed the programmes he wanted to watch. *Countdown*, *Coronation Street*, *Panorama*, an afternoon film matinee of *Went the Day Well?* The shaky blue pen makes Nelson feel suddenly very sad.

'Come on,' he says. 'There's nothing here. Let's go and see the doctor.'

'No signs of satanic ritual then, boss?'

'Show some respect,' growls Nelson. Even as he says it, though, he remembers how Archie described Buster Hastings yesterday. 'Hell of a chap,' he had said.

A real old devil.

*

Ruth, like Judy, has taken the day off. Tatjana is arriving tomorrow and the spare room is still full of old boxes so she has dropped Kate at Sandra's. She stopped off for strengthening croissants, has made a pot of coffee and is now preparing to transform the room into a bijou boudoir, suitable for someone with American standards of hygiene and comfort. The trouble is, for the last twenty minutes she has been sitting on the floor reading an article about Ian Rankin from a two-year-old copy of the *Guardian* (found at the bottom of one of the boxes). It is only the arrival of Flint, purring and standing on Ian's face, that brings her back to the job in hand. Jesus, how do people ever tidy anything? She moves stuff from one box to another but it is still *there*, in the way. How do people like her sister-in-law ever manage to have houses where everything is shut away in cupboards and all the storage jars actually contain the thing they say they do? Ruth's sugar jar contains small flint flakes, evidence of prehistoric tool-making. Coffee is full of miscellaneous pens and Tea is a strange herbal mix of Cathbad's, almost definitely hallucinogenic.

That's another worry. Cathbad's ridiculous naming-day party. It's tomorrow night and Cathbad seems to have invited half the university. And now Tatjana will be there too. What will she

think about a crowd of pagans dancing around the inevitable bonfire? Ruth has never discussed religion with Tatjana. She knows that Tatjana, like Nelson, was brought up as a Catholic, but living through a civil war tends to change people's perceptions of good and evil. Ruth shivers; she hopes that they can get through these few weeks without ever discussing life or death or any of the points in between. They will have nice, civilised chats about archaeology, admire Kate, drink white wine and visit Norwich Castle. The past does not need to intrude at all.

What the hell is in this box? Old sample bags full of dust and pieces of flint, lecture notes, a model of a Stone Age causewayed enclosure made for the university open day, complete with plastic sheep, a theatre programme (*A Little Night Music* – when had she ever gone to see that?) and, oh my God, a picture of Ruth, Peter and Erik standing by the henge, as triumphant as if they had made it themselves.

She peers more closely at the photo. Christ, she is wearing a bikini top. She must have been at least three stone lighter then. Erik is in a billowing white shirt that has a faintly druidical feel. Peter is wearing a Chelsea football vest; his face red and sweaty. It had been a hot summer, she remembers. Working in the sun all day had been hard; they all wore hats, Ruth's a wide-brimmed straw number, Peter's one of those legionnaire's caps with a flap at the back, Erik's a jaunty panama. In the photo Erik is waving his hat, very white against the improbably blue sky. Now Erik is dead and the henge has disappeared, its timbers taken to a nearby museum to be preserved. Cathbad and the other druids had protested violently. 'They belong to the wind and the sky,' Ruth remembers Cathbad shouting, his purple cloak flying out behind him as he took his position in the centre of the sacred circle. 'They are not yours to take, to bury in some soulless museum.' Erik had sympathised but the university, who was funding the dig, had insisted. And now the timbers lie in an artificially controlled climate behind smoked glass, no longer a henge, just some oddly shaped pieces of wood.

Ruth thinks about Broughton Sea's End, about the sea advancing, eating away at the cliffs, destroying brick and stone, uncovering secrets. Was there a link between the bodies and the oil drums? The strange-smelling material had certainly looked the same. She has taken it to the lab (her car still reeks) and will run

tests on it. Six German soldiers, shot and buried under a remote cliff, buried in sand so their bones will disintegrate, oil drums containing petrol and diesel fuel. Ruth is reminded of a film that she saw years ago with her father. Nazis marching through an English village. What was its name?

She has got precisely nowhere with the tidying. The bed is still buried under boxes, although Flint has found a pillow and is kneading it busily. She will have to be ruthless. Erik sometimes used to call her Ruth the Ruthless. Time to live up to her name. She'll get some black plastic bags and chuck the lot away.

As she crosses the sitting room she sees, with a shock, that there is somebody at the front door. Her bell hasn't worked for years but her few visitors know this and usually hammer and yell. God knows how long this polite person has been standing there. She opens the door, prepared to apologise.

A man is standing on the doorstep, smiling. Blond and good-looking, there is something unmistakably foreign about him. Maybe it's the green coat or the backpack – or the smile, which shows extremely white teeth.

'Dr Ruth Galloway?'

'Yes.' She likes it when people use her correct title. She doesn't see why strangers should call her Ruth and she despises 'Miss'.

'My name is Dieter Eckhart. I wish to talk to you about some dead German soldiers.'

CHAPTER 11

‘You’d better come in,’ says Ruth.

Dieter Eckhart steps politely over the piles of books and folders in the sitting room (part of the tidying process) and perches on the edge of the sofa. Ruth offers him tea which he accepts but disconcerts her by asking for lemon instead of milk. She hasn’t got any lemon but finds a wizened lime at the back of the fridge (from Shona’s tequila phase). It’ll have to do.

‘I am sorry to trouble you at home,’ says Eckhart, accepting the unpleasant-looking drink with every appearance of pleasure. ‘But I ask at the university who is the forensic archaeologist in charge of the case.’

Ruth is gratified that someone has identified her as being in charge but rather mystified as to how Dieter Eckhart has managed to find out about the bodies so quickly. Thanks to Whitcliffe, there has been nothing in the British press.

The mystery is soon explained. From his backpack Eckhart pulls a map of Norfolk, a book about the D-Day landings and a crumpled letter written in thin black ink.

‘I’m a military historian,’ he says. ‘I have written several articles about the rumoured German invasion of Norfolk in the Second World War. One day last month I received this letter.’

He hands it to Ruth:

Dear Mr Eckhart

Please excuse my presumption in writing to you. I read your recent article in History Today entitled ‘The Great Invasion Mystery’ and it awoke some very vivid memories, memories that I have, for many years, been trying to suppress. I was a member of the Broughton Sea’s End Home Guard from 1940 to 1941. I was one of the three younger members of the platoon which was captained by one Buster Hastings. I am now 86 and in poor health, yet a memory of a particular event in 1940 has haunted me all my life. I feel I must discuss it with you. You, sir, are a young man, an academic and a German. It is for these reasons that I feel compelled to contact you. A great wrong was done many years

ago, Herr Eckhart, and, unless we tell the truth to the generations that follow, the evil will lie waiting beneath the earth.
I am, sir, your honourable former enemy,
Hugh P. Anselm.

Ruth looks across at Dieter Eckhart, who is calmly sipping his tea. Her mind is racing. The rumoured German invasion of Norfolk. Nazi officers patrolling the streets. Six bodies found buried under the cliff. *The evil will lie waiting beneath the earth.*

‘I made enquiries,’ says Eckhart. ‘There was indeed a Home Guard platoon captained by a man of that name. I decided to come to England. For many years I have been planning to write a book about the invasion.’

‘But they didn’t really invade, did they?’ responds Ruth. ‘I mean, I know there were rumours, and there was a film. I saw it with my father. But there was never any evidence.’

‘I believe there was,’ says Eckhart, putting down his cup. ‘But I believe that the evidence was deliberately destroyed.’

‘So you think the Germans came here? To Norfolk?’

Eckhart looks at her. He has very blue eyes, which reminds Ruth of Erik. He says, as if reading from a script: ‘In September 1940, in the village of Crostwick, Norfolk, villagers reported seeing a convoy of army trucks carrying dead German soldiers. Later that same month two bodies were found on the Kent coast between Hythe and St Mary’s Bay. They were identified as German soldiers by their uniforms. The bodies were burned from the waist down.’

‘Burned?’

Eckhart continues as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘On October the twenty-first the corpse of a German anti-tank gunner, Heinrich Poncke, was recovered from the beach at Littlestone-on-Sea. The discovery was openly reported in the press at the time.’

‘But I thought all these stories had been disproved,’ says Ruth, impressed, despite herself, by this recital. ‘The invasion was one of the myths of the Second World War. Like nuns parachuting or Hitler having a double.’

‘The parachuting nuns may well have been a myth,’ says Eckhart with the ghost of a smile, ‘but the invasion definitely happened. It was not the full-scale exercise that had been planned, the so-called Operation Sealion, but I believe that small

reconnaissance groups did land on the Norfolk and Kent coasts in September 1940. The story has been denied and the soldiers involved vanished into thin air.'

'How could they just vanish?' says Ruth, but she has an uneasy memory of the bodies at Broughton Sea's End, bodies buried in sand, sand which destroys bone. 'Why would anyone want to deny that an invasion happened, if it did happen?'

'Because,' says Eckhart, 'what we are looking at is a British war crime.'

Ruth is silent, thinking of Bosnia and the war crimes tribunal, thinking of Hugh P. Anselm's letter. *A great wrong was done many years ago.*

Eckhart looks at her for a moment and then continues. 'I arrived in England yesterday and I went at once to Broughton Sea's End. I learnt that the son of Buster Hastings still lived in the same house and I asked for an interview. He refused. He did not want, and I quote, to speak about his father, who was a war hero. *Especially not to a German.* I accepted this. I wandered around the village. It is very small, very picturesque. I went to the local pub. And there I had a stroke of luck.' He pauses.

'What?' prompts Ruth.

'I met Jack Hastings' daughter Clara. She told me about the bodies found on the beach. Then I knew. I knew I had uncovered the truth.'

I uncovered it, you mean, thinks Ruth. Or, rather, Ted, Trace, Steve and Craig did. She is beginning to find Eckhart's manner rather irritating.

'I don't understand,' she says. 'Why didn't you just go to see this Hugh Anselm, the one who wrote the letter?'

'That was, of course, my first plan,' says Eckhart unperturbed. 'But when I arrived at his home, a settlement called, I believe, sheltered housing, I discovered that he was dead.'

'Dead?'

'Yes. A week before the warden had discovered him, sitting in his stair-climbing device.'

'A stairlift?'

'Yes. A heart attack I am told.'

Ruth shivers. She knows that there can be nothing sinister about Hugh Anselm's death, he was eighty-six after all and had described his health as 'poor'. All the same, the letter, with its

references to evil and wrong-doing, had spooked her. It reminded her too vividly of other letters, letters about death, ritual and sacrifice, the letters which were her first introduction to Nelson and the Serious Crimes Unit. And, now, to think that its author was dead ...

‘There’s another survivor from that time,’ she says, thinking that this information can’t possibly be classified. ‘Archie Whitcliffe. He lives in a nursing home somewhere near Broughton.’

Dieter leans back, compressing his lips into a thin smile. ‘Archie Whitcliffe too is dead. He died yesterday.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Perfectly. I have just come from the nursing home. Apparently the police are investigating.’

The police. That meant Nelson. Ruth feels obscurely hurt that Nelson hasn’t told her about Archie Whitcliffe’s death. But, then, it only happened yesterday. When she told him about the bodies being German he had just left the Home after interviewing Archie. That reminds her.

‘How did you know the bodies were German?’ she asks.

For the first time, Eckhart looks disconcerted. ‘It was an assumption,’ he says at last, rather stiffly. ‘An informed guess.’ He looks at Ruth, the blue gaze very intense. ‘But you know, don’t you? You know that they are German.’

Ruth sighs. Eckhart knows so much she doesn’t see any point in stalling. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Mineral tests on the bones show that the bodies probably come from Germany.’

‘So,’ says Eckhart softly. Then he smiles at Ruth. He really is very good-looking. ‘In that case, Dr Galloway, I know who your soldiers are.’

CHAPTER 12

'The Eagle Has Landed,' says Nelson. "That was the film. Michael Caine was in it. Not a lot of people know that."

"Michael Caine wasn't in the film I mean," says Ruth. "It was a much older film. Black and white. I went to see it with my dad when it was part of some film festival."

Nelson shrugs. "I don't go much on films myself. I like Michael Caine though. He's a real actor."

As opposed to what, thinks Ruth. But she doesn't see any point in pursuing the matter. Besides, she almost knows what Nelson means. Nelson, meanwhile, shows distinct signs of impatience. He's not one for small talk and Ruth is sure he has only come to her house, in response to her phone call, because he hoped to see Kate.

"So what did this journalist bloke have to say?" he says now, pushing his coffee cup away and getting out a notebook.

"He was a military historian," says Ruth. "As I say, he'd been researching the rumoured German invasion of Norfolk. Apparently six commandos from the Brandenburger Regiment went missing in September 1940. The story is that they were part of a team based in Norway, whose job was to infiltrate the British mainland, do reconnaissance and sabotage, that sort of thing. He has their names and everything." She hands Nelson a sheet of paper.

"Major Karl von Kronig," he reads. "Oberstleutnant Stefan Fenstermacher, Obergefreiter Lutz Gerber, Gefreiter Manfred Hahn, Gefreiter Reiner Brauer, Panzerfunker Gerhard Meister ..." Bloody hell. No wonder they didn't win the war with names like that. Take them a year and a half to do the roll call. What the hell's "panzerfunker" when it's at home?

"Radioman," says Ruth knowledgeably, though she only learnt the word a few hours ago. "And here's something you should know. Stefan Fenstermacher was missing a finger."

"It's them then," says Nelson. "Don't you think?"

"I think so, yes," says Ruth. "All the men were from a region near Brandenburg, which fits with the isotope analysis. One of the bodies was missing a finger. The ages seem right."

‘So the only question is how did a group of six German commandos end up buried under a cliff in Broughton Sea’s End?’

‘Do you think Archie Whitcliffe knew anything about it?’

‘I think he did,’ says Nelson slowly, ‘but he died before we could find out more.’

Ruth looks at him curiously. ‘Do you really think his death could be suspicious?’

Nelson sighs. ‘I don’t know, Ruth. Old man dies, no suspicious circumstances, doctor signs the death certificate right off. But, I don’t know ... The day before he’d more or less admitted he knew something about the deaths. Said he couldn’t tell me because he’d taken a “blood oath”. Next day, he dies. You don’t have to be Poirot to think that’s a bit suspicious.’

‘You might think it’s more suspicious when you hear this,’ says Ruth. And she tells him about Hugh P. Anselm.

‘Hugh,’ says Nelson slowly. ‘He was one of the men that Mrs Hastings mentioned. One of the three youngsters in the troop. Hang on ... found dead on the stairlift ...’ He is silent for a minute, thinking.

‘What is it?’ asks Ruth.

‘I don’t know. It just rings a bell somewhere. I think I ought to go to this sheltered accommodation place, talk to the warden. And I’ll ask for an autopsy on Archie Whitcliffe. There’ll be a battle royal with Whitcliffe, mind.’

‘Why? Doesn’t he want to know if his grandfather was murdered?’

It is the first time either of them has used the word ‘murdered’. It doesn’t seem to go with the world of care homes and stairlifts, but Nelson thinks of Archie Whitcliffe’s face when he talked about the blood oath, of Maria’s words: ‘*Lucifer. He said Lucifer.*’ Then, for no reason at all, he thinks of Jack Hastings standing proudly in front of his fireplace whilst his mother knitted placidly in the background. ‘*He never forgot the horror.*’

He turns to Ruth. ‘Whitcliffe’s funny about his family. You know what it’s like in Norfolk. His family have lived in their little village for donkey’s years. Probably intermarried with donkeys by the look of ‘em. Whitcliffe’s proud of his grandfather, thinks of him as a war hero. He was touchy enough about us interviewing him so he won’t want an inquest. He’ll want to bury him properly, coffin, flowers, black horses, the lot. He won’t want me

holding things up, suggesting that the old man was done away with.'

'Is Whitcliffe the only relative?' asks Ruth, who has never met Nelson's boss.

'No. There's a whole bunch of grandchildren, according to Archie.'

'Well, some of them might support you.'

'It's possible. Whitcliffe's talked about a sister. There's a brother too, I think.'

Nelson frowns at the floor, which is still covered with books and packing cases. Ruth wonders when he's going to leave. She'd like another few hours of tidying before she has to collect Kate. She suspects Nelson of holding out for a sight of Kate. He'd been most put out to hear that she was at the childminder's.

Sure enough, when there is a sudden knock on the door, Nelson's first words are, 'Is that Katie?'

'No, she's still slightly too young to drive herself home,' says Ruth, getting up. Who can it be? Dieter Eckhart, back with some more Eagle Has Landed stuff? Shona stopping by for a gossip? Cathbad?

But when she opens the door, she is greeted by an elegant woman with short, streaky hair, carrying a suitcase.

'Ruth!'

'Tatjana ...' Ruth stammers. 'I wasn't expecting you till tomorrow.'

'You didn't get my text?'

Ruth shakes her head. Her phone is upstairs, buried under a pile of rubbish.

'I'm sorry,' says Tatjana, looking back at the taxi, already performing a clumsy U-turn in the narrow road.

'It doesn't matter. Come in.'

Ruth is aware of a dark figure looming in the background. 'Tatjana,' she says. 'This is Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson.' She doesn't know why she gave him his full title but she is surprised at the sudden interest on Tatjana's face.

'Pleased to meet you, Detective Chief Inspector,' she says.

*

'... it's a deeply stratified alluvial site in the Paleocoastal

tradition, so of *course* we were surprised.'

'Of course.' Ruth can't remember exactly which site they're talking about. Is this still Arlington Springs Woman? Over the past few hours Tatjana has ranged from the European Palaeolithic to the Beaker people and Civil War sites in Dorset. Ruth thinks they are now on New World archaeology, a subject on which Tatjana turns out to be rather an expert, but Ruth is finding it hard to keep up. She knows she is rather insular about archaeology, preferring British or European sites (Britain was, of course, part of the European landmass only ten thousand years ago) to those in the Americas or the Antipodes.

She is also distracted because she has collected Kate from Sandra's and the baby, not content to remain snoozing picturesquely in the background, is making a bid for centre stage, cooing and emitting high-pitched yelps like a miniature cheerleader. Ruth thinks she is being rather sweet but she is scared to take her attention off Tatjana for too long. So she sits on the floor with Kate, who is propped up by cushions, occasionally handing her a brightly coloured toy which Kate ignores in favour of chewing the TV remote control. Tatjana has, so far, not looked in Kate's direction once.

Nelson had stayed only a few minutes, long enough for Tatjana to pronounce him 'interesting' which, Ruth discovers, is her highest term of praise.

'How come you are entertaining a policeman in the afternoon?' she asked, raising her eyebrows slightly. Ruth hoped she wasn't blushing.

'I'm seconded to the Serious Crimes Unit,' she said, trying to adopt a Serious Crimes face. 'I help with their investigations sometimes. Forensics, bones, dating, you know.'

'And is there much serious crime in Norfolk?' Tatjana still looked amused.

'You'd be surprised,' Ruth says. She needs to leave Kate and start supper. As all she has in the fridge are two chicken breasts and a very old tomato (she had planned to go shopping tomorrow), the options are limited. She is going to call it chicken cacciatore and hope for the best. At least Tatjana has brought some Duty Free wine. The problem is that she can't leave Kate on her own and she doesn't like to ask Tatjana to keep an eye on her. Eventually she puts Kate into her baby seat and carries the

seat into the kitchen. Jesus, there was a time when she could go out of the house any time she wanted; now even a trip to the next room is complicated.

Tatjana follows her, continuing the story of Arlington Springs Woman. Ruth tries to listen, cook, and respond to Kate at the same time. But before long Kate feels ignored and her cheerleader yelps dissolve into full-scale crying. Ruth picks her up and jiggles her up and down, whilst heating a bottle of milk in a saucepan. Tatjana watches from the doorway, glass of wine in hand.

When Ruth is sitting down with Kate (plus bottle) on her lap, Tatjana asks, in a tone of academic enquiry, 'So, what about Kate's father? Is he involved?'

'He's married,' says Ruth shortly.

'That must be tough.'

'It's okay,' says Ruth, settling Kate more comfortably into the crook of her arm. 'I wouldn't want to be married. I like living here on my own.'

'With Kate.'

'Yes. With Kate. And Flint.'

Flint had received a much better welcome than Kate. Tatjana had bent down, tickled his chin and told him that he had very fine whiskers. Flint, as was his wont with people who fancied themselves cat lovers, ignored her completely. Perversely, with Nelson, who prefers dogs, Flint is positively skittish, jumping on his lap at every opportunity and shedding hairs over his trousers.

'It must be lonely here sometimes,' says Tatjana. 'Do you have neighbours?'

'The house next door is empty. The other side are holiday people. They usually come down for a week or two in summer.'

'And your work at the university. Is it good?' Perhaps Tatjana is realising that Ruth has contributed very little to the archaeology stories.

'It's okay. I like my students. I like teaching. I haven't done any interesting digs for a while. The last one was a year ago, on the Saltmarsh, with Erik.'

'I can't believe that Erik is dead,' says Tatjana. 'How did it happen? I always thought he'd live forever.'

'He died here on the marshes,' says Ruth. 'It was dark, the tide was coming in. He drowned.' She hopes that Tatjana won't want to hear the details; she never wants to think about that night

again.

‘Dear God.’ Tatjana is silent for a minute. Kate’s eyelids droop, the bottle lolls out of her mouth and a fine stream of milk pours onto Ruth’s arm.

‘Ruth.’ Tatjana sounds pained. ‘Your sleeve.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ says Ruth. ‘She’s nearly asleep. I’ll put her down in a minute.’ She can feel Kate getting heavier and heavier in her arms. It is six o’clock, with any luck she’ll sleep now for a good part of the night.

Tatjana sits opposite, looking at Ruth so intently that she is embarrassed, conscious of the contrast between Tatjana’s sleek clothes and salon-perfect hair and her own crumbled, milk-stained appearance.

‘I look a mess,’ she says, meeting Tatjana’s gaze.

‘You look great,’ says Tatjana. ‘You haven’t changed at all.’

Ruth knows that she has. She is older, fatter and sadder. But she has noticed before that if you don’t do anything to yourself people will assume that you haven’t changed. Also, that you don’t care.

‘I’m forty,’ she says.

Tatjana grimaces. ‘Me too.’ Unexpectedly, she reaches out and touches Kate’s hair. ‘It seems a long time ago, doesn’t it? Bosnia?’

It did, but it also seemed like yesterday. Ruth only has to close her eyes and she sees the hotel, Erik telling stories by candlelight, Tatjana standing in the dark holding a gun. Whatever else, they mustn’t talk about Bosnia.

So she tells Tatjana about the bodies at Broughton Sea’s End.

*

Tatjana’s son, Jacob, was dead. Ruth was grateful that Tatjana told her this straight out, saving her from making any crass comments like, ‘I didn’t know you had a son, how old is he?’ making things worse and worse, as if they could possibly be worse. In that summer of 1995 Ruth did not know what it was to have a child, and to lose a child ... well, that is still unimaginable. She remembers that she sat there, in the shadow of the pine trees, literally stiff with shock. She simply did not know what to say; her life’s experience so far had not prepared her for that moment. Her parents were experts on death and the afterlife,

of course. They would have known what to say. 'We're praying for you.' 'I'm sure he's in heaven with all the other little angels.' But Ruth could say none of this. She didn't believe in God, especially not in a God who could take a child just so that he could have another little angel. What can you say to a girl your own age who has lost her child?

Perhaps fortunately, Tatjana did not seem to expect Ruth to speak. Calmly, almost coldly, she told the story. Tatjana had married young, her husband was another academic and, unusually for a Yugoslavian man of that time, he supported her career. Even now, Ruth remembers the expression on Tatjana's face when she said the word 'career'. When Jacob was born, Tatjana continued with her studies, teaching part time at the university. Then, when Jacob was two, she got the chance to study for a PhD at Johns Hopkins University. Encouraged by her husband, Tatjana left Jacob with her parents and went to America. While she was away, all hell broke loose.

'My husband died very early on. He was in a convoy of trucks taking the injured out of Mostar. His truck was hit by a grenade. I was trying to arrange for Jacob and my parents to fly out to the US when I heard that their village had been attacked. I couldn't get news, I was going mad. Eventually I travelled there overland, a nightmare journey. The village was destroyed. As if it had never been.'

'But do you know for sure that Jacob—'

Tatjana had laughed. A sound that Ruth hopes never to hear again.

'I tracked down one of the only survivors. She told me that she had seen Jacob and his grandparents shot. The only question remaining is: where is his body?'

She had looked at Ruth in the dappled light from the trees.

'I must find his body, Ruth. You know what Erik says about needing to find a grave. It's true. You need to see the dead, to bury them, to mourn them. Otherwise ...' Her voice dropped away. 'Otherwise you cannot continue to live.'

'But how can ...' Ruth was miserably aware of how inadequate she sounded. What a poor confidante she was proving. She too lapsed into silence.

'I don't know,' said Tatjana briskly. 'You know they are moving bodies all the time to try to hide their crimes.' This was true and

it made the archaeologists' job much more difficult. On some sites it was clear that they were dealing with secondary, sometimes even tertiary, burials, bodies that had been moved several times to avoid detection. Sometimes they could use 3-D imaging to gauge the depth of a grave but often they had to rely on their knowledge of strata and earth movement to tell how many times and how recently a body had been buried. At other times they just had to guess, to use their 'archaeologist's sense' as Erik put it.

'I need to make enquiries,' Tatjana was saying. 'I can ask everyone we meet about the village and what happened to the bodies. That's where you can help me, Ruth.'

'Of course I will.'

'And,' Tatjana had said, almost as an afterthought, 'I know the name of the man who did this. That will be helpful.'

Ruth did not know why but Tatjana told her anyway. 'So I can kill him.'

CHAPTER 13

The sheltered housing looks rather pleasant in the spring sunshine. The grounds are immaculate, the grass cut in neat deckchair stripes, the beds full of daffodils. The buildings too are attractive, low and red brick, doors and windows freshly painted. Not bad, thinks Nelson approvingly, one day he might have to fix his mum up with something like this. Not yet, though. Maureen Nelson goes mad if anyone mentions the words ‘pensioner’ or ‘sheltered’ or, especially, ‘warden’. Besides, when the time comes, Nelson has two older sisters who will manage the whole thing, complaining all the time about the extra work but scorning any offers of help, especially from him. It’s handy being the youngest sometimes.

Now, Nelson presses the bell marked with the dreaded word ‘warden’, but surely even Maureen wouldn’t disapprove of the charming, soft-spoken man (possibly Irish, like Maureen herself) who ushers him through the double doors and into a ground floor flat.

‘Do you live on site?’ asks Nelson.

‘Yes,’ says the warden, whose name is Kevin Fitzherbert.

*

‘Lots of places, they say “warden” but it’s just a voice on the end of the phone, not someone living downstairs who’ll come and unblock your sink for you.’

‘Is that what you do? Unblock sinks?’

‘That, and find lost glasses, help people up if they take a tumble, change the channel on the TV – there’s hell to pay if they can’t get *Countdown* – undo jars, post their pools coupons.’

Nelson looks round the room. It is comfortable and extremely neat with a single armchair pushed close to the TV, remote control and folded *Radio Times* on the arm.

‘Are you married, Mr Fitzherbert?’ he asks, accepting an invitation to sit down.

Kevin Fitzherbert looks slightly discomfited. ‘Divorced. My wife and I ... we had our problems ... but I’m off the drink now,

been off it for five years. I'm in AA. Made a completely new start.'

Not for the first time Nelson wonders at the things people will disclose to the police without being asked. The fact that Kevin Fitzherbert used to have a drink problem might be relevant or it might not. Either way, Nelson stores the information away and smiles non-committally.

'Tell me about Hugh Anselm,' he says.

'Ah ...' Fitzherbert looks genuinely sad now, the Irish lilt well to the fore. 'That was a tragedy, so it was. A fine gentleman. A true gentle man, if you get my meaning. One of the old school.'

Nelson wonders where else he heard this phrase recently. 'How did he die?' he asks.

'Heart attack,' says Fitzherbert. 'He had a heart problem.'

*

Angina. It was very serious, the slightest exertion could trigger an episode. He knew he could go any time. I try to call on the older residents once a day, check they're all right. Most people like a regular time. I used to see Hugh at nine o'clock, he was an early riser. We'd have a cup of tea, have a go at the *Telegraph* crossword together. He was a whizz at crosswords, Hughie. Anyway, I called on him as usual and there was no answer. I thought it was odd so I used my master key and went in. He was sitting in his stairlift, seatbelt on, stone dead.'

'Why did he have a stairlift?' asks Nelson, suddenly thinking. 'Aren't these all flats?'

'No, some are maisonettes. They're the nicest units really. Hugh had some stairs and climbing made him breathless, so he used the lift.'

'How long did they think he'd been there?'

'Almost twenty-four hours the coroner thought. He must have got into the lift just after I'd left him the day before.'

'The coroner. Did the police investigate? One of my team?' The incident must have happened when he was on his holiday, thinks Nelson. It still rang a faint bell though.

'Yes, a nice fellow called Clough. I remember the name because I used to be a big Forest fan.'

Clough! That's why the story seemed familiar; Nelson must have read it in the weekly report. Although Clough isn't really to

blame – the death appeared to be natural causes and he did write it up – Nelson still feels slightly irritated with his sergeant.

‘Mr Fitzherbert,’ he says, leaning forward, ‘as I said on the phone, I’m interested in anything Hugh Anselm may have told you about the war. Especially his years in the Home Guard.’

‘I know you mentioned it and I’ve been wracking my brains so. But the truth is he never talked about the war. I think he’d been in the RAF but he never spoke about it. He was all for peace, Hugh. Wouldn’t even wear a poppy. Said Remembrance Day should be as much about the German war dead as the British. He said there was no good side and no bad side, only winners and losers. He was a bit of a Leftie really. Used to write all these letters to the papers about Iraq and so on.’

‘But he read the *Telegraph*?’

‘Ah, that was just for the crossword. He took the *Guardian* too and the *New Statesman*. History magazines as well. He was a fine, well-educated man.’

‘Mr Fitzherbert, I know it sounds odd but did Hugh Anselm ever mention ... Lucifer?’

‘Lucifer? Dear God, no.’ In an instinctive gesture, Fitzherbert’s hand hovers over his forehead. A Catholic then.

There’s nothing else here, thinks Nelson. Hugh was a fine, well-educated man who died, aged eighty-six, of a heart attack. No close family, Nelson has already asked. His wife died eight years ago. No children. Nobody to mourn him except Kevin Fitzherbert, who missed his company over the crossword.

But, at the door, Nelson has a Columboesque last thought.

‘The stairlift. Was it up or down?’

Fitzherbert’s brow creases. ‘That’s the funny thing. It was halfway up.’

‘Halfway up? Had it broken?’

‘Must have done, but it’s an odd thing. They’re serviced regularly, and when I saw Hugh sitting there I pressed the button. It was an instinctive thing really. And the lift moved instantly.’

‘So why would it stop halfway up?’

‘Something must have interfered with the current. Or Hugh pressed the button by accident.’

‘Or someone could have stopped it,’ says Nelson.

Nelson drives back to the station, thinking hard. On the face of it, the deaths of the two old men could be from natural causes. But there are enough questions now to add up to a suspicion. How did the stairlift stop in mid air? What did Archie mean by the word 'Lucifer' and what was the blood oath sworn by the two men when they were still teenagers? There's something else too that's nagging at him. Something to do with an armchair, a *Radio Times* and Ruth Galloway. He frowns, taking the corner by the Campbell's Soup factory on two wheels.

When he gets in, he asks Leah for black coffee and fills in a form requesting an autopsy on Archie Whitcliffe. His boss will see it, no question, but it makes sense to get the wheels in motion. 'Just following procedure,' he'd say, when challenged. Whitcliffe is a great one for procedure.

As he is laboriously filling in the boxes, Clough appears in the doorway.

'You wanted me, boss?' Nelson had sent him a text.

'Yes, sit down a minute.'

Clough sits down, his jaws still working on some item of food lodged in his back teeth.

'It's about Hugh Anselm.'

Clough looks blank.

'The old man found dead in the stairlift.'

'Oh, yes. It was while you were on holiday. Poor old bloke got in his stairlift, had a heart attack, found the next morning. I filed a report.' Slightly defensively.

'The stairlift stopped halfway up. You didn't think that was odd?'

'The warden thought it must have malfunctioned. Or the old boy pressed the wrong button by mistake. There were no suspicious circumstances.' Definitely defensive.

'What happened to Hugh Anselm's stuff? His belongings?'

'I don't know. I presumed next-of-kin took them.' Clough looks curious now. 'What's this all about, boss?'

'Probably nothing.'

'Is there a link to old man Whitcliffe?'

That's the trouble with Clough. He's not as thick as he looks.

'Possibly. They were both in the Home Guard, and before he died Hugh Anselm wrote a letter to a German military historian. He said something had happened in 1940 that had haunted him

all his life. A “great wrong” he called it.’

‘Do you think it was the murder of our six chums?’ The team now know that the dead men were almost certainly German. Nelson has heard Clough calling them ‘the Nazi boy band’.

‘I don’t know and now there’s no-one left to ask.’

‘Suspicious,’ says Clough happily.

‘Yes.’

Clough is on his way out when Nelson calls him back.

‘Cloughie, what do you know about *Countdown*?’

‘*Countdown*, boss? It’s a quiz programme. Teatime TV. For the oldies. It’s a word game. Dictionary corner and all that.’

‘The sort of thing someone who liked crosswords would enjoy?’

‘I suppose so.’

Because Nelson had identified the thought that was nagging at him. Archie’s newspaper, folded back at his day’s viewing. *Countdown*, *Coronation Street*, *Panorama*, an afternoon film matinee of *Went the Day Well*?

When Clough has gone, he googles *Went the Day Well*?

‘Chilling classic,’ he reads, ‘imagining the brutal Nazi invasion of a sleepy English village.’

CHAPTER 14

'We gather today to bless a child.
A new life that has become part of our world.
We gather today to name this child.
To call a thing by name is to give it power,
and so today we shall give this child a gift.
We will welcome her into our hearts and lives
and bless her with a name of her own.'

Cathbad is in full swing. He made a bonfire in the back garden and placed a trestle table in front of it. He then put a goblet of wine and a bowl of olive oil on the table and has invited the guests to form a ring around the fire.

Ruth, carrying Kate in her blue snow suit, follows him rather reluctantly. She had been surprised to see how many people turned up for the naming day party. Tatjana, of course, was already in residence and was quickly chatting to Phil about Arlington Springs Woman. As well as Phil there was Shona, Cathbad's friend Freya from the modern languages department, Trace and Clough, Ted, Judy and, surprisingly, Dieter Eckhart and Clara Hastings.

'I met Cathbad at the university,' explained Dieter. 'He invited me. I hope you don't mind.'

'Why should I mind?' said Ruth, rather sulkily. Cathbad can hardly know Dieter, who is doing some research in the history department, very well. Ruth suspects him of extending the invitation to annoy Phil, who might be jealous of Dieter's academic reputation (and his good looks). What is more surprising is how close Dieter and Clara seem, arm-in-arm, laughing warmly over shared jokes, speaking in German together. He has only been here a few days after all.

'Clara's been a great help to me,' Dieter explained. 'Telling me many stories of local history.' He gave Ruth a rather meaningful look.

Clara laughed. 'And I've been practising my German. I spent a year in Germany before going to uni but I'm awfully rusty. I wish I'd worked harder at school now.'

‘I bet you were the model pupil,’ said Dieter with a smouldering look.

‘Oh, I was useless,’ said Clara carelessly. ‘I was expelled from two schools.’

Well, Dieter was certainly making every effort to help Clara catch up, retiring with her into a corner of Ruth’s sitting room and managing, with clever body language, to block out the rest of the company altogether.

To her surprise, Ruth found that she was enjoying the party. It’s been a long time since she had so many people in her house and, since Cathbad and Freya provided the food and drink, it’s hardly a strain on her as hostess, though she had trouble finding enough plates and glasses (Clough is drinking from a Winnie the Pooh mug and Phil is eating from one of Kate’s moulded plastic bowls). Ruth was just settling down to a good chat with Judy when there was a thunderous knock at the door.

‘That’ll be the boss,’ said Clough. ‘Trying to force entry.’

Oh please God, no.

But Clough was right. Standing framed in the doorway were Nelson, unsmiling in jeans and a leather jacket, and Michelle, carrying a huge, beribboned parcel.

‘I know we weren’t supposed to bring presents,’ said Michelle. ‘But I think this’ll be useful.’

Ruth accepted the present with thanks, her heart sinking. Despite Cathbad’s directive, Kate was actually doing quite well for gifts but the Nelson offering dwarfed the rest.

‘Do open it, Ruth,’ said Michelle, accepting a glass of punch from a suddenly attentive Cathbad. Where the hell had he found a clean glass?

Ruth hates opening presents with other people watching (memories of grisly Christmas mornings pretending to be grateful for a Bible) but there was no refusing without looking churlish. Gingerly, she tore the pink flowered paper.

‘Wow! It’s a ... it’s wonderful ... what is it?’

It was a pink gingham chair attached to a wide base on wheels. The chair had a tray in front bristling with things to touch and press and crinkle. It looked faintly alarming, like a power base for a pink-checked alien. Ruth had a sudden flashback to Doctor Who and the Daleks. Exterminate, exterminate.

‘It’s a baby walker,’ laughed Michelle. ‘You put her in the chair

and she can walk around. Well, she won't be able to do it yet, but in a few months she'll be whizzing about.'

Ruth found the idea of Kate on wheels rather frightening. At least, like the Daleks, she won't be able to go upstairs.

'Wow. It's fantastic. Thanks.'

'Where's Kate? I haven't seen her for ages.'

In the first months of Kate's life, Michelle had put herself out to be kind to Ruth. She came all the way to the Saltmarsh to coo and offer advice. She suggested meeting in town, she volunteered to drive Ruth and Kate to the park, she even offered to take Kate swimming 'at my club'. Ruth was touched, and she yearned for female friendship, especially from someone who had been through the whole baby thing herself, but however much she tried to pretend that Kate had no father, that she had sprung fully formed from Ruth's brain like a modern-day Athena, she couldn't quite face the prospect of playing happy families with Nelson's wife. So she wriggled out of the invitations, pleading work and tiredness, and when Michelle eventually stopped ringing, she felt both relieved and disappointed.

But this evening Michelle was all friendliness, and admiration for Kate.

'Oh, isn't she gorgeous? Can I hold her?'

Ruth is always surprised how maternal Michelle is. For someone so glamorous, she doesn't give a thought to sick on her shoulder or a baby grabbing handfuls of her hair. She held Kate expertly (not even relinquishing her glass) and nuzzled her head.

'Oh, she's lovely. I'd forgotten how they smell. Look, Harry. Do you want a hold?'

'I'm fine, thanks,' said Nelson.

Now, as the guests traipse out into the garden, Ruth looks back and sees Nelson helping Michelle on with her swishy red coat. She smiles and leans back against him. Behind them, Dieter and Clara are still whispering together. Love is in the air, thinks Ruth sourly, it must be the effects of Cathbad's home-made punch.

'This ceremony is called a wiccaning or a saining,' Cathbad explained earlier. 'It's to introduce Kate to the Gods.'

'Or, if you don't believe any of that tosh,' put in Ruth, 'it's just a party.'

But, now, in the dark, with the fire leaping upwards, it does feel more like a ceremony than a party.

‘The Guardians, that’s Shona and I,’ says Cathbad modestly, ‘should stand either side of the table. Ruth, you hold Kate in the middle.’

Ruth obeys. She’s willing to go along with Cathbad only so far. At the first sign of human sacrifice, she’ll be straight back indoors.

‘What is the baby’s full name?’ he asks in his Druid voice, echoey and impressive.

‘Kate,’ says Ruth. ‘Kate Scarlet.’

She looks at Nelson and finds, to her horror, that she can’t look away. Only the two of them know the significance of the name though, to judge by Judy’s sudden start, some of the others might guess. Scarlet Henderson, the little girl involved in the abduction case that first drew Ruth and Nelson together.

For a full minute, Ruth and Nelson stare at each other across the flames. Then, to Ruth’s relief, Cathbad starts speaking again.

‘May the gods keep this child pure and perfect, and let anything that is negative stay far beyond her world.’

He puts his finger in the olive oil and gently touches Kate’s forehead. Ruth watches him closely to check that he doesn’t trace any sinister symbol on her, but no, it’s just a touch. Then, he puts his finger in the wine and places a drop on Kate’s lips. She smiles. Her mother’s daughter.

‘May you always have good fortune,’ intones Cathbad, ‘may you always have good health, may you always be joyful, and may you always have love in your heart.’

Once again, Ruth looks at Nelson. He is staring into the fire.

‘You are known to the gods and to us as Kate Scarlet. This is your name, and it is powerful. Bear your name with honour, and may the gods bless you on this and every day.’ He passes the wine to Ruth. ‘Drink and pass on.’

He then addresses the wider circle. ‘As you drink, say aloud: “I honour you, Kate Scarlet.”’

Ruth takes a sip. The wine rushes to her head like whisky. ‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet,’ she croaks. She passes the cup to Shona who takes an enthusiastic gulp. ‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet,’ she says, her voice loud and clear. She passes the cup on to Dieter.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet,’ he bows slightly.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet,’ echoes Clara.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Clough sounds as if he is laughing.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Trace is expressionless.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Tatjana, putting the stress on the ‘you’.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet,’ Ted booms as loudly as Cathbad himself.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Judy’s voice is soft.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Phil’s self-conscious mumble.

‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Freya’s fervent whisper.

Michelle takes the cup with complete self-possession. ‘I honour you, Kate Scarlet.’ Nelson takes the wine. His lips move but no-one hears any words. The flames have risen so that Ruth cannot see his face.

Cathbad replaces the cup on the table. ‘Can I have her?’ he asks Ruth. Rather reluctantly Ruth hands over the bundle in the blue snow suit. Cathbad holds the baby up to the night sky. ‘Welcome, Kate Scarlet. We ask the gods to watch over you and over your father and mother.’ He turns to Ruth, smiling. ‘That’s it.’

Numbly, Ruth follows Cathbad back into the house. Why did he say that about father and mother? Does he suspect something or did he just download the whole thing from paganceremonies.co.uk? That’s the trouble with Cathbad, you never know how much is airy-fairy spiritual stuff and how much is good old-fashioned stirring. Did the other guests suspect anything? She doesn’t think any of them were listening very hard – they all had the slightly glazed expression of people in church. Nelson will have noticed though, she’s sure of that.

Kate has fallen asleep and Ruth is glad to escape upstairs and put her to bed. She takes off Kate’s snow suit and puts her, still dressed in her babygro, into her cot, under the blanket knitted by Ruth’s mother. What would Ruth’s parents make of the ceremony around the fire? In all probability, they’d be searching for their bell, book and candle at the first sight of the fire or the oil or the cup of wine.

But when Ruth goes downstairs and starts talking to Judy over the remains of the punch, Judy says, ‘It reminded me of the Catholic mass. You know, sharing the wine and all that.’

Ruth wonders if the analogy also occurred to Nelson who, like Judy, was brought up a Catholic.

‘Are you getting married in a Catholic church?’ she asks.

Judy grimaces. 'Yes. The full nuptial mass. Darren's a Catholic too. We met at school.'

'It must be nice,' says Ruth, 'knowing someone that well.'

Judy fishes a slice of orange out of the punch and eats it meditatively. 'It is nice. I mean, we've got the same memories, the same friends. Our families all know each other.' She laughs. 'I can't help wondering what it would be like to go to bed with someone you hardly know. God, I must be drunk.'

Ruth thinks of a dark night, a terrible discovery, an unknown body moving against hers.

'It may be exciting,' she says, 'but I think the best thing must be to go to bed with someone who knows every inch of your body.'

'Sounds fun.'

Ruth whirls round to find Nelson standing behind her. She knows she is blushing like a bonfire.

'This is women's talk,' says Judy.

'So I gathered. We're off, Ruth. Thanks for a ... well, thanks.'

'Have you spoken to Dieter? About the bodies?'

'We had a quick chat. He seems a bit preoccupied now.'

Ruth glances over to the sofa where Dieter and Clara are still nose to nose, his hand brushing the back of her neck.

'Is that Jack Hastings' daughter?' asks Nelson.

Ruth nods.

'Wonder what he'll think about her snogging a German?'

'Don't mention the war,' warns Ruth.

'Right. Well, goodbye.' He leans towards her as if he is about to kiss her cheek but, at the last minute, veers away again. Michelle swoops over and enfolds Ruth in a scented embrace.

'We must meet up very soon,' she says.

'What on earth does she see in him?' says Judy, as the door closes behind the Nelsons.

'His sparkling personality?'

'Hardly.'

Now Tatjana is ladling away at the punch.

'That man, Nelson,' she says, 'he is very attractive.'

Judy snorts and turns away to talk to Cathbad.

'Do you think so?' says Ruth.

'Yes,' says Tatjana dreamily. 'He is very powerful, very dark. I think he has a secret.'

Ruth looks at her sharply but Tatjana is staring into the

punchbowl. In the kitchen Ted and Clough have started singing. 'I wanna be near you. You're the one, the one for me.'

Tatjana shoots a sidelong glance at Ruth. 'I think I felt a spark though.'

'What?'

'I think he was attracted to me,' says Tatjana. 'I felt it.'

Ruth says nothing. She doesn't quite know what to make of the new, sexually confident Tatjana. She prefers the quiet girl sitting in the pine forest, drinking wine in defiance of the wolves.

'He's married,' she says at last.

'And his wife is very beautiful,' says Tatjana, 'but not clever enough for him, I think.'

'I wanna be near you,' bellow Ted and Clough from the kitchen. 'You're the one for me.'

Ruth suddenly feels very tired. She wants to lie down and sleep for a week. Would it be very rude to go to bed and ask the last one out to turn off the lights?

Judy appears at her shoulder. 'Bye, Ruth. Thanks for a lovely evening.'

'You're not driving are you?' Ruth doesn't know what was in the punch but she's betting it was ninety per cent proof.

'No, Trace is giving me a lift. As soon as she can stop Cloughie singing, that is.'

In the other room, the concert ends abruptly. Not for the first time, Ruth envies Trace's natural authority.

'You must come on my hen night,' says Judy. 'It's a week on Saturday. I'm dreading it.'

'Why do you want me to come then?' laughs Ruth. 'So I can dread it too?'

'I need someone on my side.' Judy turns politely to Tatjana who is still standing by the punch. 'You must come too. A fine English tradition for you.'

'I'd love to,' says Tatjana, much to Ruth's surprise.

Ted also cadges a lift with Trace, leaving Cathbad, Ruth, Freya and Tatjana to start to clear away plates and eat the last of the crisps. Phil and Shona left shortly after the ceremony and Dieter and Clara seem to have disappeared.

'That was an interesting experience,' Tatjana is saying to Cathbad.

'It's important,' says Cathbad, 'to introduce the baby to the

household guardians.'

Tatjana stacks glasses neatly in the sink.

'So, Cathbad,' she says, 'how long have you been a devil worshipper?'

CHAPTER 15

The next morning Nelson drives to work in a sombre frame of mind. Last night felt like one of those weirdly scientific Japanese tortures designed to discover how much one person could stand in a short space of time. He prides himself on his self control but there are easier things in life than watching your wife hold your illegitimate baby. And what was Cathbad playing at around the fire? Nelson is sure that when he said the words, ‘we ask the gods to watch over you and over your father and mother’, Cathbad looked straight at him. Does Cathbad know that Nelson is Kate’s father? Before she was born Cathbad overheard something which may have given him a clue and Nelson has no doubt at all that he has remembered, word for word. Cathbad is also well in with all the university lot – maybe Ruth has confided in Shona or even that slimy Phil. Christ, probably everyone at UNN knows by now – Nelson’s hands are wet on the steering wheel. If so, it’s only a matter of time before Michelle finds out.

Michelle likes Ruth. She wants to help her. ‘She doesn’t know the first thing about looking after a baby’ she told a decidedly twitchy Nelson on her return from a visit to Ruth and the new-born Kate. ‘I caught her reading today.’ ‘*Reading?*’ echoed Nelson, rather wildly. ‘Yes, she was feeding Kate and reading some old archaeology book.’ ‘What’s wrong with that?’ Michelle had laughed. ‘When you have a baby you don’t have time for reading. Not if you’re doing it properly.’ Was Ruth doing it properly? She doesn’t quite look comfortable with a baby, the way Michelle does. Ruth still holds Kate slightly warily, as if she might explode, but she seems to do all the right things and, sometimes, she looks at Kate with an expression that makes Nelson’s heart ache. And she talks to the baby all the time, even if she does address the five-month-old like one of her postgraduates. ‘We’re going outside now, Kate. You might find it a bit cold at first but that’s just the contrast with inside ...’

No, to Nelson’s anxious eye, Ruth seems to be doing just fine. He’d worried about her going back to work but the childminder seems competent (unknown to Ruth, Nelson has run a third check on Sandra) and he knows that, as he’s hardly in a position to help

her openly, Ruth needs the money. He has offered to give her some money every month (he'd tell Michelle it was a retirement scheme or something) but Ruth refused. 'I want to do this on my own,' she said. A statement which, though courageous and admirable in many ways, nevertheless fills Nelson with dread.

When it comes down to it, does he have any rights at all where Kate is concerned? None at all, says a lawyer whom he has secretly consulted. 'If your name isn't on the birth certificate, you're no-one.' Nelson has never seen Kate's birth certificate but he's betting it's 'father unknown'. Ruth could do anything – emigrate, join a commune, refuse to send Kate to school – and he couldn't do a thing about it. Jesus, she's already had a pagan christening service. His mother would turn in her grave (the shock of Kate's parentage would have killed her). When Cathbad put the oil on Kate's forehead Nelson had surprised himself by how strongly he wanted Cathbad, anyone, to trace the sign of the cross there. *I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* Once a Catholic, as they say. And Kate Scarlet! Why had Ruth done that? Even today, when he thinks of the name Scarlet, he feels as if his heart will break.

By the time he reaches the station he is sunk in gloom and the sight of Whitcliffe waiting for him in his office does nothing to cheer him up. He knows that Whitcliffe won't have dropped in for a cosy chat about his promotion prospects.

Whitcliffe is holding a piece of paper. When he sees Nelson he strides forward and thrusts the paper into his face.

'What is the meaning of this?'

Nelson has never known his boss so angry. Normally Whitcliffe keeps his distance and speaks in a light monotone. Now he is eyeball to eyeball with Nelson, his face red, his voice, in which the Norfolk accent has suddenly come to the fore, choked with fury. In an odd way, for the first time, Nelson almost likes the man. But he knows he must be careful, very careful.

'What do you mean, sir?' He throws in the 'sir' to appease Whitcliffe.

'Mean? I mean this!' Whitcliffe waves the paper again. Nelson backs away slightly.

'What is it?' Though he knows very well.

'How dare you ... how *dare* you ask for an autopsy on my grandfather.'

‘I had good reasons, sir,’ says Nelson stolidly.

They glare at each other. Whitcliffe is still breathing heavily but his colour has faded and, when he speaks, his voice is almost back to RP.

‘Perhaps you’d be good enough to share your *reasoning* with me.’

‘Why don’t we sit down?’ Nelson attempts a soothing tone and feels as if he has scored a point, especially when Whitcliffe takes the subordinate’s chair and allows him to take his place behind his own desk. But, as soon as they are seated, Whitcliffe returns to the attack.

‘How dared you do this, Harry. Behind my back.’

‘I’m the officer in charge of the investigation,’ says Nelson. ‘I followed procedure. I contacted the coroner’s office and copied you in. Otherwise you wouldn’t have known,’ he adds.

‘I know everything that goes on round here,’ spits Whitcliffe. Nelson hopes this isn’t true.

‘Look – er – sir ... I know this is difficult for you—’

‘Difficult!’ Whitcliffe looks ready to explode.

‘Your grandfather is dead and, naturally, you’re upset. But I have reasons to suspect that death was not by natural causes.’

‘I’ll be fascinated to hear them,’ says Whitcliffe nastily.

‘The day before your grandfather died,’ says Nelson, ‘Detective Sergeant Johnson and I interviewed him about the bodies found at Broughton Sea’s End. I asked him if he remembered anything from his time with the Home Guard. His words were: “If I knew anything I wouldn’t tell you. I took a blood oath.”’

‘Is that your only—’

‘I didn’t think much of it,’ says Nelson smoothly, ‘though I thought he was concealing something. That night he died.’

‘He was an old man. He had a stroke.’

‘Two weeks ago,’ Nelson goes on, ‘another old man died. His name was Hugh Anselm and he served with your grandfather in the Home Guard. Shortly before he died he wrote to a German historian telling him that something terrible had happened at Broughton during the war. Two weeks later he was dead. He died in his stairlift. It had stopped halfway up the stairs. It’s possible that it was stopped deliberately.’

There is a silence. Gerry Whitcliffe stares at Nelson as if he is trying to read his mind. Nelson keeps his face bland. In the

background he can hear Clough and Tanya arguing about whose turn it is to go out for chocolate.

‘Are you suggesting—’ begins Whitcliffe.

‘I’m not suggesting anything, sir,’ says Nelson. ‘But there are just too many coincidences for my liking. Both Mr Whitcliffe and Mr Anselm died before they could tell their stories. I don’t like that. I don’t like that at all.’

‘But who could possibly have killed them?’

‘I do have a name,’ admits Nelson.

‘What name?’

‘Lucifer.’

*

Ruth and Tatjana are walking up a hill. After two weeks of mostly fine weather, it is cold with a biting east wind. Forecasters are talking happily about possible snow showers and the sky is a heavy, leaden grey. Not really the day for a pleasant country walk but Tatjana has expressed interest in a Roman site near Norwich and Ruth, who has no lectures this morning, is determined to entertain her guest. Besides, she knows the site well. She was called in last year when human bones were discovered in one of the trenches. The archaeologist who organised the dig is a Roman expert called Max Grey. He is an intelligent, attractive man and Ruth has sometimes allowed herself to think about him in a singularly unprofessional way. But the site also holds darker memories – a wolf circling in the night, letters written in blood, a dead baby. Ruth shivers and pulls her anorak tighter. Tatjana, dressed in a trendy suede jacket, looks half frozen.

‘I’d forgotten how cold it is in England.’

‘It must get cold in Cape Cod.’

‘Yes, but we have warmer houses.’

Tatjana hasn’t spoken much about her life in America. She and Rick seem to spend most of their time sailing and cooking gourmet meals. Ruth has seen photos of a low white house, shiny cars, shiny people, a vast gleaming boat. She thinks of her tiny cottage, the spare room still half full of boxes, her battered Renault 5. ‘You’ve done so well, Tatjana,’ she said once. ‘Two incomes, no kids,’ replied Tatjana, her face closing.

At the top of the hill, the ground drops away again. To the

untrained eye, there is little to see, some grassy ridges and hollows, a trench running southwards and a rather forlorn-looking sign. But Tatjana draws in her breath. 'It's quite a big settlement.'

'Yes, Max thinks it was a vicus, a garrison town. The road,' she gestures to the trench, 'leads to the sea.'

Tatjana strides over to the sign, which is the only evidence of the lottery money which funded the dig. Max is hoping for a further grant next year. He says that half the town is still underground.

'It says here that bodies were found buried under the walls.'

'Yes. Max thought they may be foundation sacrifices. You know, offerings to Janus.'

'The God of Doorways?'

'Yes, and of beginnings and endings.'

Tatjana looks thoughtful. 'I would have thought that human sacrifice was more Celtic than Roman.'

'Well, the Romans often adopted Celtic Gods and traditions. They were pragmatists in that way.'

Tatjana turns away. 'I'm sure the Celts were pragmatists too. When your land is invaded, you tend to be.'

Ruth curses herself. How the hell have they got back to Bosnia? But when Tatjana turns back she is smiling. 'It's beautiful up here,' she says. 'You can see for miles.'

'Yes,' says Ruth. 'In the summer it's lovely. There's a great pub here too.'

'A pub,' says Tatjana. 'Does it do beer and ploughman's lunches?'

'You read my mind,' says Ruth.

*

Judy, too, is feeling the cold. Nelson has dispatched her to Broughton with a brusque instruction to 'talk to the locals about the war'. Great idea, thinks Judy, except that on a day like today the locals are very sensibly inside watching TV. So far she has spoken to a surly teenager and a lost tourist looking for Great Yarmouth. She has already walked through the village twice, not that this has taken very long. It's really just the one street – a Victorian terrace – and, behind it, a few newer-looking houses.

There is only one shop, but by the looks of it, some of the other houses used to be shops. They have large bow windows, now swathed in net curtains, and in some cases the shop names remain, written or engraved under the eaves. 'S. Austin and son, Fishmonger'. 'T. Burgess, Butcher'. 'Ronald Caffrey, Grocer'.

The one remaining shop occupies the end of the row. Is this why it has survived when S. Austin, T. Burgess and Ronald Caffrey were all forced to hang up their aprons? It certainly doesn't have a very prepossessing window display – a few shrimping nets and a dusty bucket arranged around a collection of ancient-looking magazines: *Knitting World*, *Horse and Hound*, *The Coarse Fisherman*. What would happen, Judy thinks, if she asked for a copy of *Cosmopolitan* or, worse, the *Guardian*?

A bell clangs loudly behind her and a bespectacled man appears from behind a bead curtain.

'Yes?' His eyebrows are raised. The shop clearly does not encourage passing trade. It is an odd mix of supermarket, newsagent and post office. Tins of tomatoes share shelf space with string, sellotape and lurid pink Mother's Day cards (though Mothering Sunday was three weeks ago). The post office counter bears a large handwritten sign saying 'Closed'. Another sign gives parcel weights in pounds and ounces. Evidently the metric system has yet to reach Broughton Sea's End.

Judy shows her warrant card which causes the shopkeeper's eyebrows to disappear further into his sandy hair.

'Police?' he echoes faintly.

'Just a few routine enquiries,' says Judy, putting on a reassuring voice. 'In fact, we're interested in something which may have happened fifty or sixty years ago.'

'I'd hardly remember it then, would I?' says the man huffily, though, to Judy, he could be any age.

'I just wondered if there were any residents who *could* remember those days,' says Judy soothingly. 'People older than yourself. After all, in a shop like this you must get to know everyone in the community.'

Her flattery is not entirely wasted. The eyebrows come down slightly.

'We try. We're a valuable local resource. You must sign our petition to save the post office.'

'I will.'

‘In a few years’ time shops like this will vanish completely. It’ll be all supermarkets and chain stores.’

Good thing too, thinks Judy. But then she thinks: if I were an old person and I wanted a copy of *Knitting World*, I wouldn’t want to have to catch a bus to the next village. Mind you, didn’t Nelson say that the whole of Broughton was slowly falling into the sea?

‘I think it’s dreadful,’ she says. ‘I hate supermarkets myself. I never go in them.’ This is true; she buys all her groceries on-line.

The man leans on the counter, eyebrows back in place, friendliness itself.

‘You’re so right. Supermarkets are all very well but where’s the personal touch?’ He leers at her.

‘I’m sure you’re always delivering groceries to the old folk.’

‘Well, I can’t lift much because of my back but I’ve always got a cheery word for them when they collect their pensions.’

‘Speaking of older people ... ?’

‘Yes.’ He straightens up, looking slightly suspicious once more.

‘Well, there was Mr Whitcliffe, a fine old gentleman. But he went into a home a good few years ago.’

‘I’ve met Mr Whitcliffe.’ Judy does not feel inclined to go into details.

‘His grandson’s in the police force, I believe.’

‘He’s my boss. My ultimate boss.’

‘Really?’ This has the effect of banishing some of the suspicion. The Whitcliffes, a local family, are obviously to be trusted.

‘Anyone else from that era?’

‘Mr Drummond died a couple of years ago. There’s Mrs West. She lives at number two Cliff Road. One of the new houses.’

‘Thank you,’ says Judy. She gives him her card. ‘Could you ring me if you think of anyone else?’

The man nods. He is squinting at the card.

‘Johnson. Are you one of the Cromer Johnsons?’

‘No,’ says Judy. ‘I’m not from round here.’

She walks to Cliff Road. There are only four houses, modern versions of fishermen’s cottages with exposed brick and fake weatherboarding. There is no answer at number two. Number one is also empty, but at number three she is told that Mrs West (‘a lovely old lady’) died last year. So much for local knowledge.

Disconsolately she wanders on to the end of the road. The church, squat and imposing, lies on her left, raised on a slight hill

surrounded by gravestones. Judy climbs the short flight of steps and reads that the church of St Barnabas dates from the tenth century. It was built in Saxon times, burnt down and rebuilt in the Norman era, became derelict in the Middle Ages and was rebuilt (again) by a Victorian philanthropist. The notice board proclaims the church as Anglican but, as Judy's Irish Catholic father would say, 'It was ours once.' She tries the door; it's locked.

It is starting to rain. Judy puts up her hood and decides to call it a day. She has done her best but everyone in Broughton Sea's End is either dead, or in an old people's home or inside reading fishing magazines. It's an odd place, pretty but rather sad. Maybe it's just the weather but everything looks grey and washed out and somehow defeated. 'Fight coastal erosion' said a sign in the shop window, but Judy can't imagine the residents doing anything so energetic. No, the sea will get them; the houses, the shop, even the church. The sea will win in the end.

As she turns back to the steps, a name on one of the gravestones catches her eye. She goes back to have a look. 'Keaton "Buster" Hastings MC. Born: 1893. Died: 1989. He fought the good fight.' This must be Jack Hastings' father. Someone who clearly did relish a fight. What had Archie said about him? *Hell of a chap ... Tough as old boots. Ran a tight ship too. We weren't just playing at soldiers.* There is none of the usual stuff about Buster being a loving husband and father but lying in front of the headstone is a fresh bunch of red roses.

Walking back through the graves, some lovingly tended, some overgrown with ivy and softened by moss, Judy finds: 'Sydney Austin, born 1880, died 1961'. 'Thomas William Burgess, born 1890, died 1971'. 'Ronald Caffrey, born 1901, died 1996'. The boss was right; they're all here. They're just all dead.

*

Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, thinks Nelson as he dials the number for Wentworth and Thenet, Solicitors. Whitcliffe has grudgingly agreed to the autopsy, saying that he'll speak to other family members. He then stalked out of the station, speaking to no-one. Nelson takes advantage of his absence to find out about Archie's will. Wentworth, when Nelson

finally gets hold of him, is wary. Only when Nelson points out that the will's contents will be in the public domain once it has cleared probate, does the lawyer relent.

The will is simple. Archie's money is divided equally between his grandchildren, including Whitcliffe. It's not much but Nelson assumes that, whatever money Archie once had, it has long since disappeared to pay the bills at the Greenfields Care Home. The only other bequests are a writing case to Hugh Anselm and a hundred pounds and some detective books to Maria.

There is also a rather unexpected message for Whitcliffe: 'Gerald, I'm so proud of you and I know you'll do the right thing. Please take care of Maria and George.' George? This must be Maria's son, the one Archie used to buy presents for. But why didn't Archie take care of George himself, instead of asking his grandson to do it? Nelson can't exactly imagine Whitcliffe in the role of caring uncle to George. And why did Archie care so much in the first place? Maybe he saw Maria as a surrogate granddaughter but, then again, he was hardly short of grandchildren.

When was the will written? Two years ago, says Wentworth. Archie was not to know that Hugh would predecease him by a matter of weeks. Archie mentioned corresponding with Hugh some years ago – was this correspondence more significant than it seemed, important enough to be marked by a memento? Nelson has made an appointment to see Hugh Anselm's niece, his closest relative. He doesn't expect much. According to Kevin Fitzherbert, the niece, Joyce Reynolds, visited maybe twice in ten years. Nevertheless, she has inherited all of her uncle's effects (including, presumably, the writing case) and so it may be worth talking to her. There's always a chance that an avid letter writer like Hugh Anselm may have a journal or an unpublished novel somewhere.

He is thinking about letter writing and *Countdown* and crossword puzzles when his phone rings.

'Nelson,' he barks.

'Jack Hastings here,' answers another, equally authoritative voice. 'Are you aware that there's a Kraut journalist hanging round my daughter?'

Nelson wonders whether to affect surprise and force Hastings to tell him about Dieter Eckhart and his suspicions, but in the end

he settles for faint distaste at such shockingly un-PC language. 'I've spoken to a *German* military historian called Dieter Eckhart,' he says.

'That's the fellow. Turned up at my house, if you please. An Englishman's home is his castle, I told him.'

Nelson ponders how much Hastings loves this phrase. He uses it in almost every TV interview (Nelson has looked them up) and it is, presumably, why he still insists on living in the fortress-like house on the cliff. Delusions of grandeur.

'I sent him away with a flea in his ear,' Hastings continues. 'Then I find out he's been pestering Clara.'

'Pestering' is not how Nelson would describe the distinctly mutual snuggling on Ruth's sofa, but it's hardly worth mentioning this now. Instead, he says, 'Why did Eckhart want to speak to you?'

For the first time, Hastings sounds discomfited. 'He had some ridiculous theory about those bodies found under the cliff. Thought they were German, or some such nonsense.'

Time to stir Hastings up a little, thinks Nelson. 'Our forensic tests show that the bodies were very possibly of German origin,' he says.

There is a silence. 'What?' says Hastings.

'Mineral analysis shows that the six bodies found in Broughton were of possible German origin,' repeats Nelson patiently. 'And we believe we know their identities.'

'You do?'

'Dieter Eckhart has been researching the disappearance of six German commandos in September 1940. I assume that's why he came to you.'

'What the hell's it got to do with me?'

'Your father was in charge of the Home Guard at that time.'

There is another silence and then Hastings says, in a more conciliatory tone. 'Look, I'm more than happy to help with any police enquiry but my mother's old and she's not very strong. Something like this could upset her, make her ill. And Clara, well, she's sensitive ...'

Nelson remembers the blonde girl bouncing into the sitting room at Sea's End House. Sensitive is not the word he'd use.

'We'll be very low key,' he assures Hastings. 'But I'll need to speak to you again.'

‘Understood,’ says Hastings, sounding subdued.

‘One more thing, Mr Hastings. Does the name Hugh Anselm mean anything to you?’

‘Hugh Anselm? No I don’t think so.’

‘Your mother mentioned a Hugh, one of the other young men in the troop. That was Hugh Anselm.’

‘Very possibly, but what’s he got to do with anything?’

‘I think he may have been murdered,’ says Nelson.

CHAPTER 16

'I did my best,' says Joyce Reynolds, 'but I've got my own family, you see.'

'It must be difficult,' says Judy sympathetically, 'looking after an elderly relative.'

Joyce Reynolds relaxes and looks saintly, though, as Judy and Nelson both know, her only contact with Hugh Anselm, her elderly uncle, was a yearly Christmas card and those two visits to the sheltered housing estate. Two in more than ten years.

'Was he lonely?' Nelson had asked Kevin Fitzherbert.

'Lonely?' Fitzgerald smiled, rather sadly. 'Sure and we're all lonely here. Hughie coped with it better than most. He had his books, his crossword, his letters. He hadn't shut the world out.'

'Your uncle sounds an interesting man,' says Nelson, accepting a second biscuit. Joyce Reynolds had not wanted the police to visit but, now they're here, she's determined to put on a good show. She is a stout woman in her late fifties, wearing a ruffled blouse over black velvet trousers. She has obviously dressed up for them, thinks Judy, though she's sure it's lost on Nelson. Joyce Reynolds is the daughter of Stephen Anselm, Hugh's elder brother, who died in 1984. Joyce herself has three children and two grandchildren. She shows them the photos.

Judy looks at the pictures with interest. All those brides with frothing dresses and trailing veils. All those hats, all those smiles. She tries, and fails, to imagine her own wedding photos. The dress, tried on last week, is undeniably lovely, the problem is the person inside the dress. Judy doesn't suffer from unduly low self esteem; she's certain that, with the help of hairdressers and a vat of make-up, she'll look pretty enough, it's just ... the *expression*. How on earth is she going to manage that dewy smile, that look of mingled sentiment and rapture, when all the time she's just counting the minutes until it's all over and she can put on her old jeans and watch *Top Gear*? Still, she mustn't think about that now. She's a police officer, conducting an investigation. Clough would love to be here, putting his oar in, being all boys together with the boss, but it's her call because she's good at interviews. She'd better get on with it.

‘Sergeant Johnson’s getting married soon,’ says Nelson suddenly.

Judy glares at him. She knows what he’s doing, of course. Softening a potentially hostile witness with some personal details, the human touch, trying to *empathise* (a word Nelson usually hates). It’s probably a good move but it doesn’t stop Judy wishing Nelson would fall into a fiery hell-hole and be tortured by sadistic demons.

The witness, though, is definitely softened. ‘Are you?’ Joyce turns to Judy with what appears to be genuine interest. ‘When?’

‘In May. At St Joseph’s.’

‘The Catholic church?’

‘Yes.’

‘I was brought up a Catholic,’ says Joyce, ‘but my husband didn’t hold with it so I became a Unitarian.’

‘Was Hugh a Catholic?’ asks Nelson.

‘Yes,’ says Joyce. ‘Dad used to say he was quite religious as a boy but I never remember him going to church.’

‘Have you got any pictures of your dad and Hugh?’ asks Nelson cosily. He tries to smile apologetically at Judy. She ignores him.

In a drawer, far below the fat satin wedding books, Joyce has a brown envelope containing some sepia photographs. Two boys, both wearing glasses, gaze up at them. The elder is in school uniform, the younger in a white suit with sash.

‘First Communion?’ asks Judy.

Joyce shrugs. ‘I suppose so. Here’s Hugh in RAF uniform. He couldn’t fly planes because of his eyes but he did navigation, I think.’

The same intense, short-sighted stare. The same slightly stiff pose. Hugh Anselm was one of those men who don’t look quite right in uniform. He seems nervous, unsmiling, hands clenched at his sides. He must have joined the RAF after the Home Guard, thinks Judy.

‘What did your uncle do after the war?’ asks Nelson.

‘Went to university. The only person in the family to go. Dad always said that Hugh was the clever one.’

‘And after university?’

‘I’m not sure. He did lots of jobs. He was a teacher, worked in a bank, even ran his own restaurant for a while. As I say, we weren’t exactly close.’

‘What’s this picture?’ asks Judy, pulling out a photo of a group of men standing proudly beside a boat. Hugh is older here but the glasses and the anxious expression are the same.

‘Oh that must be the lifeboat. He was a keen lifeboatman.’

‘At Broughton Sea’s End?’ asks Nelson.

‘I suppose so.’

‘There isn’t a lifeboat any more, is there? I think someone told me that they can’t use the ramp these days.’

Joyce Reynolds shrugs. ‘I don’t know. It’s a weird out-of-the-way place, Broughton. When they were little we used to take the children on the beach there sometimes but I haven’t been for years. Uncle Hugh didn’t like the beach at Broughton. He said it had an unwholesome atmosphere. That was the way he used to talk.’

Nelson examines the photograph. ‘Did your uncle ever talk about Jack Hastings?’ he asks. ‘Or his father, Buster?’

‘Is he the man who lives in the big house on the cliff? The one that’s meant to be falling into the sea? No, I can’t remember Uncle Hugh ever mentioning him.’

‘Buster Hastings was the captain of the Home Guard.’

‘Hugh didn’t talk about the war. He was a bit of a communist, if you want the truth. It was one reason why we didn’t see so much of him. My husband doesn’t stand for that sort of thing.’

Like Catholicism, thinks Judy. Mr Reynolds’ prejudices are clearly wide ranging.

‘Mr Anselm had a fascinating life,’ says Nelson. ‘I’m surprised he didn’t write a book.’

‘Oh, he was always writing,’ says Joyce. ‘I’ve got a pile of the stuff somewhere.’ And she disappears, returning with a bulging cardboard box which she puts into Nelson’s arms.

Nelson looks inside. The box is full of files, exercise books and letters. He opens a book at random. *5th January 1963*, he reads. *I’m no longer entirely convinced about Kennedy*. The words are small and neat, written in a thin italic hand. He finds a blurred copy of a letter to Nestlé complaining about their business practices in the Third World. *Yours sincerely, Hugh P. Anselm*.

‘What did the P stand for?’ he asks.

‘The what? Oh, in Uncle Hugh’s name? Patrick, I believe.’

‘Can I borrow these?’ he asks, indicating the box of papers.

‘Keep them,’ says Joyce carelessly. ‘I haven’t got the time for

reading.'

*

Nor, it seems, has Maria. Archie Whitcliffe's favourite carer looks rather bewildered as she shows them the list of books left to her in the old man's will.

'It was very kind of him but' – she spreads her arms out wide – 'I'm afraid my English isn't good enough. And these, they sound difficult. '

Maria doesn't have the actual books yet (or the money also left to her) but the solicitors have forwarded a list of titles.

They are sitting in Maria's cramped Norwich bedsit. The place is scrupulously tidy but extremely bare – just a double bed, a table and two chairs. She must share the bed with her little boy, thinks Judy. The only evidence of the child is a plastic box of toys and a teddy bear on the bed. Maria's bedside table is an old black trunk on which are displayed pictures of a smiling elderly couple and a large statue of the Virgin Mary. No television, no radio. How does she entertain the kid? wonders Judy. With the toys neatly stacked away in the box? With the statue of the universal mother? Maria says that Archie gave her money to buy him toys. What did she buy?

'Books,' is the surprising answer. Maria opens the trunk and brings out pristine editions of Winnie-the-Pooh, Peter Rabbit and Babar the elephant.

'We read them at night,' says Maria. 'I want him to have a proper start in life. George is very smart, very good at reading.'

'Did Archie leave you all his books?' asks Judy. She imagines the old man and the pretty young mother sitting together, talking about Agatha Christie and Babar and the future mapped out for the surprisingly named George. Maybe Archie wanted George to have his library.

'No,' says Maria, looking worried again. 'Just a few.'

'Particular favourites?'

'No. I never heard of most of them.'

'Why do you think he left them to you?' asks Judy.

'I don't know. I used to buy books for him, from charity shops. Maybe this is to say thank you.'

Shrugging, she hands Judy the list. Nelson reads over her

shoulder.

The Third Truth by Kurt Aust
Love Lies Bleeding by Edmund Crispin
Evil Under the Sun by Agatha Christie
The Fourth Assassin by Omar Yussef
One Step Behind by Henning Mankell
The Hound of the Baskervilles by Sherlock Holmes
Sea Change by Robert B. Parker
Lost Light by Michael Connelly

‘And these titles don’t mean anything to you?’ asks Nelson. He only recognises one of the books, the Agatha Christie. He thinks he’s seen it on telly. Oh, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He knew a dog handler once with a German Shepherd called Baskerville.

‘No,’ says Maria, her eyes filling. ‘It was kind of him though. He was always very kind.’

It was kind, thinks Nelson as they descend the gloomy staircase, smelling of cabbage and worse. But more money would have been more useful. Enough to buy a proper bed for the boy and maybe a TV. Well, perhaps they’re first editions and will be worth millions. Maria deserves a break. The exorbitant fees at Greenfields obviously don’t go towards the carers’ wages.

Outside he takes a deep breath and sees Judy is doing the same.

‘Not much of a life is it?’ he says.

‘No.’ Judy chews her lip. ‘When I think of all the things my sister’s kids have.’

‘Most kids today have too many things,’ says Nelson opening the car door. He thinks of the hundreds of toys he has thrown out or recycled over the years: games lacking half the pieces, Barbies with missing limbs, electrical gadgets ignored after the first thrill of acquisition, the unread books.

‘I wonder about George’s father,’ says Judy. ‘He obviously doesn’t help much.’

Nelson starts the car, forgets that he has left it in gear and curses as the Mercedes jerks forwards. Christ, why are people always talking about fathers? Johnson’s been funny all day, come to think of it. The way she kept looking at the wedding photos at

Joyce Reynolds' house and now getting all misty eyed about the little boy. He knows she's getting married and all that but she's got to learn to keep emotion out of policing.

'Where are we going now?' asks Judy, bracing herself as he takes a corner.

'Sea's End House,' says Nelson. 'I think it's time we asked Mr Hastings a few more questions.'

*

'Bone has both a mineral and an organic content in the ratio of two to one.'

Ruth is addressing a motley group of students in the university's smaller lecture theatre. It's a stuffy room and one or two of her audience look almost asleep. She must make more of an effort to engage them but the subject, The Dating and Treatment of Bones, is not exactly an exhilarating one, even to her. The trouble with the MA course is that a lot of the students come from overseas, mostly Asia, and English isn't their first language. By the time that she gets onto decalcification and fossilisation, she senses that she will have left most of them behind.

She presses a key on her PowerPoint. Like most academics, Ruth is secretly happier with handwritten slides.

'This is an example from the *Mary Rose*. Anaerobic silt is excellent for preservation of bones.'

Unlike the bodies at Broughton Sea's End, buried in sand. Did whoever buried them know that, over time, their bones would crumble into nothingness? Yet, in Ruth's experience, evil has a habit of finding its way to the surface. *The evil will lie waiting beneath the earth.*

The last slide. 'Cremation destroys the organic content of bone. Prehistoric cremations weren't hot enough to destroy the bone altogether. Flesh was burnt away but the bone remained – becoming white and fragile but mostly retaining its shape. These bone fragments provide valuable evidence for forensic archaeologists. Any questions?'

One interesting question about mummification and Ruth is heading back to her office, just time for a quick sandwich before her two o'clock tutorial. Having Tatjana in the house has cut

down on the amount of time that she can spend working at home. It also means that she has to do some proper food shopping. She'll go to the supermarket after she's collected Kate. It's a hassle but Kate loves sitting in the baby seat of the trolley, smiling at the other shoppers and trying to eat cereal boxes.

It has been a strain, in some ways, having Tatjana to stay. The cottage is really too small for two adults. Ruth remembers how when she and Peter split up, amidst all the feelings of sadness, loss and guilt, there was also a distinct relief that she could now spread her books all over the sitting room floor and go to the loo with the door open. She and Tatjana seem to spend a lot of their time apologising to each other and waiting for the other one to go first down the stairs. Whenever Kate wakes in the night Ruth is full of guilt that Tatjana's sleep has been disturbed and when, after a hard day's work, she would really like to slob out and watch *Coronation Street*, she has to pretend to be interested in reruns of *Time Team* on Channel 4. Still, Tatjana has started her teaching which means she is out all day. And some things have been nice – having someone to talk to about work, cooking proper meals, having an excuse to open a bottle of wine with supper, having someone to laugh with when Flint gets stuck in the cat flap.

Ruth grabs a sandwich from the canteen and rushes back to her office before she can become trapped in a long discussion with one of her colleagues about exam grades or Prehistoric burial practices. She also keeps a weather eye out for Cathbad. She's fond of Cathbad and she appreciates the interest he takes in Kate, but recently he has made one too many references to Nelson being Kate's spiritual father. She knows Cathbad suspects something but he'll never know the truth unless she tells him and, if she's honest, sometimes the urge to tell someone is very strong. When she was first pregnant, she quite liked the idea of hugging a secret to herself, like the baby growing inside her. But now, sometimes she wonders how she ever thought she'd have the strength to get through Kate's whole babyhood, her whole *life*, without ever telling anyone who her father is.

Of course, one day she'll have to tell Kate herself, but by then who knows what will have happened? Nelson's daughters will have left home, it'll no longer be so important to protect them, perhaps Nelson himself will have left Michelle ... But she stamps

firmly on that thought, seeing Nelson at the naming day party helping his wife on with her coat, Michelle laughing against him. Nelson has never in his life looked at her like that. She just has to face it; he loves Michelle, he doesn't love her. And, she tells herself, she wouldn't want to live with Nelson anyway. He's too sexist, too Neanderthal, way too bossy. Good in bed though, she's shocked to find herself adding.

She hurries across the courtyard to the Natural Sciences Department. It's a bitterly cold day, icy winds and the occasional eddy of snow. She's amazed that, even in these conditions, a couple has still found time to linger under the covered walkway that leads to the main building, kissing and wrapping their arms around each other. As she gets nearer, she recognises Dieter Eckhart in his green Germanic coat and Clara Hastings, slim and girlish in jeans, with her hair in a ponytail. They are so engrossed that they don't notice Ruth and she hardly wants to engage them in conversation. When she is safely inside, she looks back from a first floor window. They are still standing there, with the snow whirling around them, locked in a passionate embrace. But, as Ruth watches, Dieter Eckhart raises his head and looks straight at her. His eyes are as pale and cold as the snow.

*

The wind is even wilder at Broughton Sea's End. As Nelson and Judy cross the bridge, they have to bend double to avoid being blown over. The snow has turned into stinging sleet, causing Judy to pull her woolly cap down over her eyes (Nelson never wears a hat). Below them the sea thunders against the rocks. How can Sea's End House withstand many more poundings like this, thinks Judy. The furthest turret seems almost at the edge of the cliff, the Union Jack whipping furiously to and fro. I wouldn't like to sleep in this house, she decides. The wind and waves are so loud that she wonders whether anyone will hear their knock on the door, although Nelson leaves the brass lion's head positively vibrating.

But, after a few minutes, the door is opened and a dark-haired woman is smiling at them.

'DCI Nelson.' Nelson doesn't smile back. 'I rang to say I was on my way.'

'Oh yes, hallo,' says the woman. 'I'm Stella, Jack's wife.'

She is charming, thinks Judy. Or maybe she'd be predisposed in anyone's favour after they'd ushered her in from the freezing cliff top and installed her in a kitchen with an open fire and twinkling pots and pans. There's even a sweet old lady knitting by the fire to complete the picture.

'My mother-in-law, Irene,' says Stella. 'Mother,' she raises her voice slightly. 'It's the policeman come back to talk to us.'

Judy suppresses a smile at the thought of Nelson being reduced to 'the policeman', like a character in an Agatha Christie play. Irene smiles sweetly at Judy.

'You're not the same girl that came before.'

'No,' says Nelson, rather quickly. 'That was Dr Galloway, the forensic archaeologist. This is Detective Sergeant Johnson.'

Judy says hallo and accepts an offer of tea. So the boss came here with Ruth, did he?

'Shall we stay in the kitchen?' Stella Hastings is saying. 'It's much warmer than the drawing room. Jack won't be long. He's taken the dogs out.'

Drawing room, thinks Judy. She doesn't know if she's ever heard anyone calling it that in real life. She shoots a glance at Nelson who raises his eyebrows.

Stella puts the kettle on and Irene starts arranging cups and saucers. The fire hisses and the sleet hammers against the windows. Judy takes a proffered shortbread and hopes that the interview takes a nice long time. She has no desire to be out on the road again with an increasingly grumpy Nelson. She hopes that Jack Hastings doesn't come back too soon. She can't imagine anyone taking a walk in this weather but she supposes that, if you have dogs, you have to take them out. A good reason for not having dogs.

She is halfway through her second cup when Jack Hastings appears, accompanied by what seems to be a sea of dogs, but soon resolves itself into two hysterically wagging spaniels.

'Detective Chief Inspector. What a pleasant surprise.'

The irony, if it is irony, doesn't register on Nelson's stony face.

'I did say that I'd like another chat.'

'A chat? Yes, fine. Fine. Chat away.'

Hastings stands in front of the fire and rubs his hands together. It's a remarkably defensive pose, thinks Judy, like a stag at bay or, perhaps, a politician facing questions across the floor of the

house.

‘Mr Hastings,’ begins Nelson, ‘last time I was here we talked about the Home Guard, about any members that might still be alive. You mother mentioned Archie Whitcliffe. He used to send you Christmas cards, apparently.’

Hastings looks over at his mother, who is making another pot of tea, deep in concentration.

‘I remember ...’ he says hesitantly.

‘Mr Whitcliffe was living at the Greenfields Care Home. Did you ever visit him there?’

‘No.’ Hastings looks bemused now.

‘What about Hugh Anselm? We spoke about him on the phone.’

Suddenly Irene Hastings puts down the teapot and bustles purposefully from the room. Nelson wonders if he ought to call her back. She’s the one who remembers the war years, after all. Jack Hastings does not seem to have noticed his mother’s departure.

‘Hugh Anselm,’ he says. ‘I don’t remember the name.’

‘You mother mentioned him. He was one of the younger members of the Home Guard. Archie Whitcliffe was another.’

‘She has wonderful recall of those years,’ says Stella, who has briskly taken over the tea-making. ‘But thinking about it can make her upset. They were desperate times here in Broughton, I think.’

Nelson continues to address Jack Hastings. ‘So you’ve never met Archie Whitcliffe or Hugh Anselm?’

‘I don’t think so, no. What’s all this about?’

‘Archie Whitcliffe died last week. Hugh Anselm a few weeks earlier.’

‘But you can’t think there’s anything suspicious about their deaths, surely? I mean they must have been old men. On the phone you said that you thought this Hugh chap had been murdered.’

Judy looks at Nelson. It’s unlike the boss to say something like this to an outsider. Never assume, that was Nelson’s mantra. Why would he suddenly start sharing his assumptions with a member of the public, especially someone who appears almost to be a suspect? She remembers the initial investigation into Hugh Anselm’s death. At the time Clough had described it as a tragic accident, there was even a sort of black humour about the

situation. 'Old dear dead in a stairlift.' Now the everyday deaths of these two old men are taking on a very different aspect and there is something sinister at work in the cosy room, even if Judy can't work out exactly what it is.

'We're following several lines of enquiry,' Nelson replies now, perhaps regretting saying so much in the first place.

Jack Hastings looks at his wife and it appears as if she is about to speak when Irene comes back into the room. She walks up to Nelson and places a photograph on the table in front of him.

'That's Archie,' she says quietly, 'with his hat at an angle. My Buster used to have a go at him about that. That's Hugh, with the glasses.'

Judy peers over Nelson's shoulder. The picture is in black and white and shows a group of men standing in front of a grey-walled house. This house, she realises. At first glance they look identical, homogenised by baggy, ill-fitting uniforms and by a sort of sepia-tinted nostalgia. But, looking closer, Judy sees that the three men in front are a lot younger than the others. Even in sepia, they look full of life.

'I've seen this picture before,' says Nelson. 'There was a copy in Archie Whitcliffe's bedroom.' He looks at Irene. 'Which was Buster?'

Judy is betting on the walrus moustache, who looks like a old-style army major, the sort of man who could be described as a 'real old devil'. But Irene points to a small, insignificant-looking chap at the far right of the picture.

'That's Buster. Jack looks very like him, doesn't he?'

'Very,' says Nelson.

'That's Edwin Butler next to him, he'd been badly shell-shocked in the first lot. That's Syd Austin, he had the fish shop in the village. His son was killed at Dunkirk. That's Donald Drummond, he was the gardener here. That's Ernst Hoffman, the one with the moustache. He was German by birth but his family lived in Broughton for years. He was interned at the start of the war and sent to the Isle of Man. Buster kicked up such a fuss that he was released. Ernst was a scientist, a very clever one.'

Stella wasn't wrong about the old lady's memory, thinks Judy. She looks back at the photograph. It's hard to connect these faded figures, like something from a history book, with the stories of life and death. But to Irene the photo isn't a historical curio, it's a

memento of her husband, of his friends.

Hugh is unsmiling, as awkward and intense as in his First Communion picture. He looks like the sort of boy who might grow up to do the *Telegraph* crossword. Archie looks far more cheerful, grinning away as if the whole thing is a game of cowboys and Indians. He looks like his grandson, Judy realises. The same good looks and proud bearing, but where Gerry Whitcliffe seems afraid of showing his true feelings, Archie looks afraid of nothing.

‘Mrs Hastings,’ Nelson addresses Irene who is still looking at the photo, smoothing its edges lovingly. ‘Do you remember any talk of a German invasion in 1940?’

Jack Hastings laughs but Irene says serenely, ‘There was always talk but it never came to anything, did it?’

‘Was invasion a big fear in these parts?’

‘Yes,’ says Irene, carefully covering the teapot with a knitted cosy. ‘We were sure they would come. Buster was sure. He insisted on nightly patrols. They had a boat too. I think it was Syd’s. They’d go out on the moonless nights, sailing along the coves. Buster thought it would happen on a moonless night.’

Judy hears Archie’s voice: *On moonless nights, the darks we called them, we went out in the boat.* What happened on that dark night, nearly seventy years ago?

‘He set up defences along the beach,’ Irene was saying. ‘Ernst helped him. He knew all about explosives, you see. “They won’t take us by surprise,” Buster used to say. “They won’t find Broughton undefended.”’

‘What happened to the defences after the war?’ asks Judy.

‘I don’t know,’ says Irene. ‘Later on, the invasion didn’t seem likely any more. We never spoke about it again.’

‘What about you?’ asks Nelson. ‘Were you part of this defence scheme?’

‘Oh yes,’ says Irene proudly. ‘I was on the listening post.’

‘Listening post?’ repeats Judy. It sounds made-up, almost childish. Stella takes up the story, smiling at her mother-in-law.

‘During the war, Detective Sergeant, there was a military listening post at Sheringham, a few miles from here. It was literally a building, a tower really, where people listened for Nazi ships out to sea. It was manned by women. Irene was one of them.’

Womanned, thinks Judy. She knows better than to say it aloud though.

‘What do you mean, they listened for ships?’ asks Nelson.

‘Just that. There were German E-boats out at sea. They could listen in on their Morse code. How do you think the code-breakers at Bletchley Park got the codes in the first place? From the listening posts. It was really important war work.’

‘The E-boats didn’t use Morse code,’ cuts in Irene. ‘We could hear them talking to each other in German. Where are you, Siegfried? I’m here, Hans.’

Nelson and Judy exchange glances. Now it seems more like a children’s game than ever. *Where are you, Siegfried?* Nelson turns to Irene. ‘Did you husband ever discuss with you what you’d do if the invasion actually happened?’

‘Oh yes,’ says Irene. ‘My job was to shoot the children and shoot myself. Buster didn’t want us taken prisoner, you see.’

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‘He was mad,’ says Judy. ‘Buster Hastings was mad.’

They are sitting in Nelson’s car. Nelson has turned on the engine to demist the windows. Outside it is still raining, the windscreen wipers struggling under the weight of water. Occasionally a gust of wind rocks the car.

‘Kill the children and kill yourself,’ says Judy. ‘Didn’t some Nazi do that?’

‘Frau Goebbels, yes. She killed her six children rather than have them live in a world where Germany had lost the war.’

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ says Judy. ‘Even if the Germans had invaded, women and children would have been okay. They wouldn’t have come to a crazy little place like this anyhow.’

‘But they did come,’ Nelson reminds her. ‘Six Germans arrived and six Germans were killed.’

‘Do you think Buster Hastings did it?’

‘It’s possible. He certainly seems a determined character.’

‘He was mad.’

‘Maybe.’ Nelson is thinking of a world where a man would tell his wife to kill their children, rather than have them fall into enemy hands. A world where fishmongers, gardeners and clever scientists were prepared to kill to defend their little piece of land.

Desperate times, Stella Hastings had said.

‘Do you really think Archie and Hugh were murdered to stop them telling the truth about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Nelson wearily. ‘I feel like I don’t know anything.’

But before they are halfway back to the station a message comes through on Judy’s phone. Clough has just come back from the autopsy. Archie Whitcliffe was killed, not by a stroke but by asphyxiation.

CHAPTER 17

The noise, thinks Ruth, is indescribable. In fact, it has gone beyond noise and has become simply a white sheet of pain, against which everything else appears in harsh silhouette, like the strobe light that turns Judy's white shirt into pure migraine. There's no music as far as she can tell, just thumps and crashes and the occasional ear-splitting screech. Her head has become a mere amplifier for the noise. She can't think, she can't feel, she can't speak. She wonders if she's about to pass out.

'It's great isn't it?'

A young policewoman, a friend of Judy's, bobs in front of her. She is dancing wildly, her head thrown back in ecstasy, arms flailing.

'Great,' yells back Ruth but the girl has danced away again, back into the whirling throng. Ruth looks at her watch. One o'clock. Surely, surely she can go home soon.

Lights, red and green this time, criss-cross the walls like snakes. Was this what the Inca sacrifice ritual was like, the *capacocha*? Deafening noise, incomprehensible sounds, adherents dancing in a drug-crazed frenzy, the victim garlanded and clothed in gold (she is wearing her best trousers), the tribal drumming, the sacred knife raised on high, the blessed moment of blackness, of death, of unbeing. The longer Ruth stays in the Zanzibar nightclub, the more she longs to be put out of her misery. Maybe she just needs some mind-altering drugs, but when she reaches for her glass it's empty. Oh God, this means she has to fight her way to the bar and be ignored by the pierced and tattooed barman (the High Priest). Maybe there's drink in someone else's glass. But all the other women in the hen party are drinking lurid cocktails with blue curaçao or advocaat. Ruth is the only one on white wine. Yawning, she reaches under the table for her shoes (they are so uncomfortable that she has taken them off) and sets out on her quest. Maybe after one more drink she can go home.

The evening started in a wine bar. That was quite pleasant – lots of talk about sex and wedding dresses, lots of plays on the theme of arresting, handcuffs and full body searches, some talk of software and hardware (Darren is in computers). But at least

there had been real wine and Ruth had liked Judy's colleagues, with the exception of Tanya, whom she finds slightly scary. After the wine bar they had had a meal and things started to blur somewhat. Ruth tried to stay soberish; she doesn't get out much and she wanted to do justice to her seafood risotto. But the wine kept flowing and soon she was discussing star signs with a policewoman called Mindy (Pisces) and singing along to *Mamma Mia*. Judy unwrapped some presents, all of which seemed to be furry handcuffs, and after much badinage with the gamely smiling waiters the party moved on to the Zanzibar.

Here things started to go downhill. As soon as she entered the club with its zebra-striped walls, leopard-spotted chairs and tiger-skin tables, Ruth was struck by a wave of tiredness so acute that she could have lain down and slept on the snakeskin floor. Despite the skull-crunching noise, she had difficulty keeping her eyes open. Judy, on the other hand, who earlier on had confessed to Ruth that she 'never wanted to get bloody married anyway', suddenly had a second wind and dragged the others out onto the dance floor where they scandalised the cooler clubbers by dancing round their handbags and demanding Abba songs.

Tatjana is in the middle of them, her hips, in skin-tight jeans, gyrating like a teenager. 'Tatjana's *fab*,' pronounced Judy. Ruth, sitting alone at the tiger-skin table, knows that *she* isn't fab, that she's forty, that she has a five-month old baby who'll be awake in four hours, that her shoes hurt and the waistband of her best trousers is digging into her skin. She's too old for all this and she's just remembered that she never liked clubbing anyway.

Should she ring Shona again? She decides against it. She has already rung four times, and the last time Kate had finally gone to sleep and Shona said that she was about to follow. Shona has kindly offered to stay the night (she will sleep in Ruth's bed and Ruth will have the sofa) so that Ruth and Tatjana can 'let their hair down'. Ruth's hair, unpleasantly sticky from Tatjana's application of hairspray, feels as if, metaphorically, it is in a tight little bun. She doesn't want to let her hair down and do wild things: she wants to be in bed with her baby beside her and Flint purring on the duvet. Still it was kind of Shona to offer. She had originally asked Clara but she said apologetically that she couldn't do Saturday. Probably out with Dieter, thinks Ruth, remembering the embracing figures in the snow.

She seeks out Judy and asks if she wants another drink. Judy appears to be in a trance, her hair across her face, her limbs twitching randomly. Glancing around, Ruth sees that everyone else is in the same state. Except Tatjana, who is dancing abandonedly with an exceptionally handsome black man.

‘What?’ says Judy.

Ruth repeats her question.

‘No,’ says Judy vaguely. ‘You’re all right.’

Ruth approaches Tatjana, who is now draped around the man’s neck. His hands are firmly clenched on her bottom.

‘I might go soon,’ says Ruth, trying not to look.

‘Go?’ repeats Tatjana, eyes shut.

‘Home. Check on Kate.’

‘Kate?’

Ruth gives up. She decides against another drink. Instead, she takes her gold lottery ticket and goes to retrieve her coat. She’ll send Tatjana a text to say that she’s left.

Outside, it is freezing. There is already frost on the ground and on the nearby parked cars, none of which seem to be taxis. Ruth decides to walk to the station, to see if there are any cabs there. Her feet are blocks of ice in her unaccustomed high heels and she finds it impossible to walk fast. Some passing youths shout at her but she ignores them, head down. She wishes she’d brought a woolly hat, gloves, her trusty wellingtons ...

‘You want a lift?’

A car has come to a halt beside her and she looks down at a smiling, toothy face. The car is a dark saloon, slightly battered.

‘Are you a taxi?’ she asks.

‘Sure. Minicab.’

For a moment she is tempted to get in beside the sinister smiling man. At least she’d be warm in his car. Before he murders her, that is.

‘It’s okay,’ says Ruth, trying to walk faster. ‘I’m meeting someone.’

The car glides along beside her for a few minutes then, to Ruth’s relief, it veers away. She has reached the reassuring lights of the station. Here, thank God, are other people – a few disconsolate football fans clutching lager bottles, a bemused-looking man with a briefcase and a mother holding a baby. What can she be doing at King’s Lynn station at two in the morning?

Ruth tries to give the woman a reassuring mother-to-mother smile but she looks away, clasping the sleeping child against her shoulder. Should Ruth offer them a room for the night?

The taxi drivers do not want to go as far as the Saltmarsh.

‘New Road? That’s miles.’

‘No can do, love. It’s out of my zone.’

Ruth is desperate. She almost considers going back to look for the smiling man in the minicab. But, eventually, someone takes pity on her.

‘All right,’ says a fat man in a Ford Cavalier. ‘Sunday rates, mind.’

It is Sunday, thinks Ruth as the taxi shoots through the deserted streets. In a few hours, people will be getting up, going to church, buying the papers. For the first time in a while, she thinks of her parents. Sunday is the most important day of the week for them; church, elders’ meetings, Bible classes, a roast meal with all the trimmings. She pictures her mother and father walking down Avery Hill Road, dressed in their best clothes, thinking of Salvation. She really must take Kate down to see them soon.

In a remarkably short time they are on New Road, crossing the marshes, blackness around them, the sea somewhere close, whispering in the dark.

‘Bloody hell,’ says the driver. ‘What do you want to live here for? Gives me the creeps.’

‘I like it,’ says Ruth. Stop talking, she adds silently, and just get me home.

‘Isn’t this the place where they found that little girl? About a year ago?’

‘I think so.’

‘Rather you than me, love. I’d be scared of the ghoulies and ghosties, living out here.’

But Ruth isn’t scared of ghosts. She pays the driver his Sunday rates and lets herself into the cottage. Creeping upstairs, she looks at the sleeping Kate. Her little face looks stern and thoughtful through the bars of the cot. Beside her Shona sleeps peacefully, her long hair spread out on Ruth’s pillow. Ruth takes a pile of bedding and heads down to the sitting room. She isn’t scared of ghosts. She is scared of nightclubs, of having to enjoy herself, of something happening to Kate, of waking up one morning and

realising that she is in love with Nelson.

Sighing, she curls up on the sofa, listening to the sea.

*

At Sea's End House, a single light shines from the turret. Like the beam from the deserted lighthouse, it illuminates the black waves as they thunder in towards land. They break against the walls of the house as if demanding entrance, turning the narrow inlet into a torrent, rising and falling as the moon waxes and wanes. Then, as the tide starts to turn, they retreat, sucking the stones from the beach where the six Germans soldiers lay buried, leaving the cliff path wet and gleaming. And leaving a body floating gently in the shallows, its blond hair streaming out in the dark water.

CHAPTER 18

Ruth's first thought is that Kate is crying. Then she realises that the insistent noise is in fact her phone, ringing on the table next to her ear. Typical. The one morning that Kate doesn't wake at the crack of dawn someone decides to make an early morning phone call. Who the hell can it be?

'It's me,' says a brusque voice, though the screen is already flashing 'Nelson'.

'What is it?' asks Ruth blurrily. She has just realised that she is on the sofa, that her neck aches and that she has a splitting headache.

'Dieter Eckhart's dead. Fisherman found his body this morning. Washed up by Sea's End House.'

'What?'

'Eckhart's dead. Cloughie and I are at Broughton now.'

'What's the time?'

'Nine o'clock. I didn't think it was much use trying to get Johnson out of bed. Have a good time last night, did you?'

Nine o'clock! Why hasn't Kate woken up yet? Ruth is just about to rush upstairs in a panic when she sees Shona descending the stairs, carrying Kate in her arms. Kate looks smug; Shona triumphant.

Ruth wrenches her attention back to Nelson.

'Was it an accident?' she asks. 'Did he drown?'

Nelson gives a humourless laugh. 'Pathologist's here now. Cause of death – a knife wound to the heart. It wasn't an accident.'

'Does Clara know?'

'Yes. She identified the body.'

So many thoughts are swirling around in Ruth's head that she feels sick. Clara, Dieter, a knife wound to the heart, Tatjana, Judy, fisherman found his body this morning. Then Kate holds out her arms and everything else is forgotten.

Kate coos loudly into the phone.

'Is that Katie?' Nelson's voice softens. 'I'll call you later.'

The phone clicks off. Ruth looks at Shona, who is still holding Kate and looking pleased with herself.

‘We’ve been up for ages,’ she says. ‘I got Kate dressed and gave her a bottle. We’ve been playing.’

Of the two, Kate looks the best for the experience. She is bright-eyed and bursting with energy. Shona has, in fact, dressed her in pyjamas and a jumper that is two sizes too big but she is overcoming these sartorial disadvantages with aplomb. She takes Ruth’s phone and bites it, experimentally. Shona, on the other hand, looks pale and bleary-eyed, her hair is unbrushed and her shirt is on inside-out. But she is obviously so pleased with herself for having survived the night and the morning that Ruth feels a rush of affection for her.

‘You’ve done brilliantly,’ she says, taking Kate and putting her on the floor where she immediately rolls over on the rug – her favourite trick. ‘Did you hear me come in last night?’

‘No. Was it late? Did you have a good time?’

‘So-so. I think I’m too old for clubs.’

‘Rubbish. You just need the right company. Where’s Tatjana?’

Shona has a distinctly ambivalent attitude towards Tatjana. Before she arrived, she was full of curiosity. ‘I remember you talking about your time in Bosnia. I can’t wait to meet her.’ But when the two finally met at the naming day party, Shona had been decidedly cool. Maybe she hadn’t expected Tatjana to be so attractive, maybe she resented the way that she had annexed Phil, maybe she was just jealous of Tatjana’s relationship with Ruth but Shona, after exchanging a few cool pleasantries, announced to Ruth that she thought Tatjana was ‘shallow’. ‘What does your Bosnian friend think of me?’ she asked, a few days later. ‘She hasn’t mentioned you,’ Ruth had replied truthfully.

‘I’m not sure where she is,’ she says now. ‘I suppose she went home with Judy or one of the others.’

‘Maybe she met a man.’

Ruth thinks of the man Tatjana was dancing with. He was certainly gorgeous but would Tatjana really cheat on Rick?

‘She’s married,’ she says.

Shona shrugs. ‘When has that ever stopped any one? Who was that on the phone?’

‘Nelson.’

‘What did he want?’

‘A new development in the case.’

‘Jesus, Ruth. You’ve even starting to talk like a policeman. I’ll

get us a coffee, shall I?’

*

Nelson walks slowly back along the cliff path. The scene-of-crime boys are loading Dieter Eckhart’s body into the white mortuary van. Clara and Jack Hastings stand watching. She had screamed when she first saw the body but now she is silent, her head on her father’s shoulder. Although he is smaller than her, there is something infinitely protective about the way he is stroking her hair. Nelson, thinking of his own daughters, feels moved.

Clough is still talking to the fisherman, who gave his statement with the stolid air of one who regularly finds dead bodies tangled up in his nets. A duty policeman had answered the first 999 call but, as soon as it was clear that a body was involved, Nelson was on his way. Jack Hastings was already there when he arrived, his dogs barking excitedly as the fisherman and the PC hauled the corpse above the tide line. Nelson was wondering whether to summon Clara when she appeared, wearing a coat over her pyjamas. Clough had attempted CPR but soon gave up. As he turned the body onto its side, water spouted from the mouth and the head flopped backwards, eyes rolling. It was then that Clara screamed.

The deputy pathologist, whom Nelson much prefers to Chris Stephenson, estimated that the body had only been in the water for a couple of hours, but that was time enough for Eckhart’s handsome face to become bloated and obscene. He is dressed in a white shirt and dark trousers and the knife wound, bloodless after immersion in the salty water, is almost directly over the heart. Nelson summons reinforcements to search for the murder weapon but he doubts that it will be found. Eckhart’s body had become wedged between rocks; otherwise it would have been carried away by the tide. The knife could be halfway to Norway by now.

‘Come on,’ he says now to Clara and her father. ‘It’s perishing here. Let’s go up to the house.’

Stella Hastings meets them at the door and guides Clara inside. ‘Come on, darling. We’ll get you dressed and you can have some hot chocolate to warm you up.’

Nelson stays in the doorway, feeling in the way but knowing that he must come in and, if possible, talk to Clara. Also, he’d

rather like some hot chocolate. Jack Hastings takes pity on him.

‘Come into the kitchen and we’ll have something to drink,’ he says. ‘I’m sure you need to speak to Clara. She must have been the last person to see the poor fellow alive.’

Apart from the murderer, that is, thinks Nelson, following Hastings along the stone-flagged corridor. He notes also that the ‘Kraut journalist’ has become ‘the poor fellow’.

Hastings’ mother, Irene, is, as usual, knitting by the fire. Nelson wonders if she has been told of the morning’s events, but as he sits at the scrubbed oak table she turns to him and says, ‘Was it him? The German boy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Poor soul,’ says Irene, knitting steadily without looking down. ‘That path is wickedly slippery. Easy to lose your footing, especially if you’ve had a drop to drink.’

Nelson hesitates. He knows he must tell the Hastings family how Dieter Eckhart was killed but he wants to choose his moment for doing so. At some point he’ll have to take formal statements, from Clara at least. He thinks it’s interesting, though, that Irene assumes that Dieter may have been drunk.

‘We don’t know what happened yet,’ he says. ‘There’ll have to be a post mortem.’

Hastings puts a mug of tea in front of Nelson. Irene looks disapproving.

‘Sorry, Ma,’ he says. ‘I couldn’t find the cups.’

‘Tea tastes better out of a cup and saucer,’ says Irene. ‘Don’t you think so, Sergeant?’

‘There’s something in that,’ agrees Nelson, accepting, with an effort, being addressed as sergeant.

‘Will you be able to trace the next of kin?’ asks Hastings, sitting opposite Nelson.

‘I think so. He was affiliated to the university or we can contact his publisher. Shouldn’t be difficult. My sergeant’s on to that now.’ He has sent Clough back to the station with specific instructions. He can’t help emphasising the word ‘sergeant’.

‘Clara might know,’ says Hastings. ‘But she’s terribly cut up. It was an awful shock.’

‘She was very sweet on him,’ cuts in Irene.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Hastings looks annoyed now. ‘She barely knew him.’

At that moment, Clara comes into the room. She is wearing jeans and a heavy jumper and looks pale but composed. She doesn't appear to have heard her father's words.

'Miss Hastings,' says Nelson gently, 'is it all right if I ask you a few questions?'

Clara looks round at her mother. 'Can I stay with her?' asks Stella.

'Of course. It's just a few informal questions. She can come into the station later to make a proper statement. You can all stay,' he adds, as Hastings and his mother show no signs of moving.

Clara sits down opposite Nelson and next to her father. Her mother puts a mug in front of her and she wraps her hands tightly round it.

'Miss Hastings ... Clara ... were you with Mr Eckhart last night?'

'Yes,' says Clara, her voice low but clear. 'We went to the pictures and then had a meal.'

'Did you come back to Sea's End House together?'

'Yes. He drove me. We got back at about eleven.'

'Did he come in? To say goodnight?' Nelson wonders if they were sleeping together. He imagines so, thinking of the entwined couple on Ruth's sofa but, at all events, they do not seem to have shared a room at Clara's parents' house.

'Just quickly. We had a cup of tea.'

'Was anyone else up?'

'Dad was in his study watching TV. I put my head round the door to say hello.'

'I was dozing really,' says Jack Hastings. 'Can't stay awake after ten these days.'

'But you remember Clara coming in. Did you see Mr Eckhart?'

'I remember seeing Clara, she said something about what I was watching. It was football, I think. I didn't see Eckhart.'

'What time did Mr Eckhart leave the house?' Nelson asks Clara.

'About half eleven, I think.'

'Did you watch him drive off?' Nelson asks. 'Wave him goodbye?'

'No,' says Clara. 'He told me to go inside because it was so cold. I waved from the door, his car was still parked outside but he was texting and didn't see me. So I went upstairs, had a bath and got into bed.'

‘What time was that?’

‘Midnight. I remember looking at the time before I got into bed. You know how spooky it is when the clock says 00.00.’

‘The witching hour,’ says Irene. Clara shivers.

‘When you drove up to the house,’ says Nelson, ‘did you see anyone hanging around? Notice anything suspicious?’

‘No.’ A smile fleetingly curves her pale lips. ‘We were too busy to notice anything.’

‘Too busy spooning,’ explains Irene helpfully.

‘What about you, Mr Hastings?’ asks Nelson. ‘Did you notice anyone hanging about outside the house?’

‘No. I took the dogs out for their last run at ten-ish. They would have barked if there was anyone they didn’t know.’

‘Do you suspect that he was ... murdered?’ asks Stella, almost in a whisper.

‘I’m keeping an open mind,’ says Nelson. ‘Now I’ll leave you in peace. I’ll have a WPC contact you about making a statement, Miss Hastings. Take care of yourself now.’

Before he goes back to the station, Nelson asks Hastings to show him round the back of the house. Beyond the French windows and the terrace there are just a few metres of land before the broken fence and the sheer drop to the sea. Nelson goes as close as he dares and peers down. Far below, the sea is breaking against the rocks, jagged murderous-looking debris left by numerous cliff falls. For the first time, Nelson realises how close to destruction the house actually is.

‘Is this where you walked the dogs?’ he asks.

‘No. Too dangerous for them here. They can easily go over the edge of the cliff, I’ve seen it happen. Dog chases a seagull and – wham. No, I always take them to the front garden at night.’

Nelson looks back at the house. There is really nowhere for a potential assassin to hide, no bushes, no trees, no outhouses. Just sheer grey walls and shuttered windows. He walks back around the side of the house, where the steep path leads down to the beach. He stops in front of a small green door.

‘What’s in there?’

‘Gardening room. It’s where we kept all our patio stuff, when we had a patio.’

Nelson tries the door; it’s locked.

‘Is it always kept locked?’ he asks.

‘Yes. No-one really uses it now.’

The front garden has some trees, though they are bent double by the constant wind that comes from the sea. It would be just possible, though, for a man to hide behind them in the dark.

‘And you saw nothing when you went out last night?’

‘No. As I say, the dogs would have barked if there’d been anyone lurking around.’

‘Anyone they didn’t know, that is.’

Hastings looks at him sharply but says nothing. As Nelson drives away, he sees Jack Hastings still standing in the front garden, frowning up at the house.

*

Nelson drives quickly, overtaking the myriad Sunday drivers out for a toddle along the coast. Dieter Eckhart was murdered, no doubt about that. Whether the killer was someone he knew remained to be seen. It usually is, Nelson knows that. Nine murders out of ten are committed by someone close to the victim. The dogs that didn’t bark: isn’t that a Sherlock Holmes story? Archie Whitcliffe would have known. Was there someone hiding in the garden that night? Or did the killer come from inside the house? Nelson would give a lot to know who Dieter Eckhart had been texting as he sat in his car outside Sea’s End House.

Does Nelson really suspect Jack Hastings, a highly respectable politician, of killing three people just to preserve his father’s reputation? On the face of it the thing is unlikely, but Nelson knows to look beyond the face of things. Buster Hastings is certainly revered in Sea’s End House and Dieter Eckhart would have had no compunction in denouncing him as a war criminal if he could find the evidence. In Hastings’ eyes, Eckhart had even corrupted his daughter. Nelson had noticed his face when Irene mentioned ‘spooning’. Jack Hastings had not been happy that his daughter was dating a German, not happy at all.

Back at the station, a grey-faced Judy is sitting at her desk. All officers have been called in to work. Whitcliffe, horrified at the autopsy report on Archie, is throwing everything at the case.

‘How are you feeling?’ asks Nelson.

‘Like death.’

‘Well, there’s a lot of it about. Good night last night?’

‘Brilliant. I can’t remember anything after midnight.’

‘Did Ruth enjoy herself?’

‘Ruth? I think she left early. Tatjana stayed the night at my place though. She was up at eight for a run. The woman’s a marvel.’

‘Any luck on Dieter Eckhart’s next of kin?’ says Nelson.

‘Yes.’ Judy looks at him sideways. ‘I rang his university. Apparently he’s got a wife and two children.’

CHAPTER 19

‘So he was married all along?’ says Ruth.

‘Apparently so,’ says Nelson, who is finding it hard to drag his eyes away from Kate. ‘His wife’s due in England tomorrow. She’s going to fly his body back home.’

‘Did Clara know? That he was married, I mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Nelson, who is building a tower of red and yellow bricks. Kate watches him narrowly.

Clara Hastings had been in that morning to make her statement. Nelson had asked Judy to drop Eckhart’s wife casually into the conversation. Clara hadn’t flickered. Towards the end of the session, though, she had grown tearful.

‘It must be so hard for you,’ Judy had said sympathetically. She is good at this sort of thing.

‘I’m just thinking about his kids,’ Clara had sniffed.

So she had known about the children.

Nelson adds another brick and then knocks over the tower. Kate laughs delightedly. She loves destruction. Ruth is beginning to regret letting Nelson come at a time when Kate would be in the house. It makes her uneasy to see them together. Whilst, on one hand, she wants Nelson to love his daughter (and, by extension, her?), she knows that the more attached Nelson gets, the more complicated their situation becomes.

‘What did the post mortem say?’ she asks, to bring him back to earth.

‘Eckhart was stabbed with a sharp metal object. They think it was scissors.’

‘Scissors?’

‘Heavy-duty scissors. The sort used for dressmaking or cutting back plants. They were honed to a point apparently.’

‘Honed. So someone had planned this? It wasn’t spur of the moment?’

‘No,’ says Nelson soberly. ‘Someone sharpened those scissors and waited.’

‘Have you any idea who?’

‘I’ve got lots of ideas,’ says Nelson. ‘Each more ridiculous than the last.’

‘Do you think the same person killed Archie Whitcliffe and Dieter Eckhart?’ Nelson has told her about the autopsy report on Archie. Death by asphyxiation was the verdict, probably with a pillow.

‘Yes I do,’ says Nelson, still looking at Kate as she thoughtfully sucks the building bricks. ‘The method was different but I’m convinced the link was the murder of the six Germans. Someone is prepared to kill to stop that story getting out. There’s Hugh Anselm too, the old chap in the stairlift. I’m sure he was murdered too.’

‘It’s so far-fetched though,’ complains Ruth. ‘Like something out a murder mystery.’

‘Archie Whitcliffe was a big fan of murder mysteries,’ says Nelson. ‘Left a pile of them to his carer.’

‘Really?’ Ruth looks interested. ‘What sort of books?’

‘Nothing special. I hoped they might be worth something. She hasn’t got two pennies to rub together, the carer, but they were just a load of old paperbacks. Second hand, most of them.’

‘Do you have the list of the titles?’

‘Somewhere. Why are you interested?’

‘I don’t know. Just an idea.’

Nelson gets Judy to fax through the list of titles (Ruth is almost the last person in the world still to have a fax machine). Ruth reads through the names while Nelson plays peek-a-boo with Kate. Ruth wishes Clough could see him.

The Third Truth by Kurt Aust

Love Lies Bleeding by Edmund Crispin

Evil Under the Sun by Agatha Christie

The Fourth Assassin by Omar Yussef

One Step Behind by Henning Mankell

The Hound of the Baskervilles by Sherlock Holmes

Sea Change by Robert B Parker

Lost Light by Michael Connelly

‘Was there anything else?’ she asks. ‘Just the list?’

‘Oh, there was some nonsense about which order to read them in. I can’t remember it now. Ask Judy.’ And he disappears behind the cushion again.

‘This is it,’ says Judy. Ruth can hear her rustling paper. ‘He

says, read them in this order: 3,2,2,2,2,3,1,2. Crazy, isn't it?'

'Maybe,' says Ruth, sitting down to look at the list again. Nelson, who is crouching on the floor beside Kate, looks up at her.

'What is it, Ruth?'

'I don't know. I just thought ... wasn't this the bloke who liked crosswords?'

'That was Hugh Anselm.'

'But maybe Archie did too.'

'Maybe. He did watch that programme, *Countdown*,' says Nelson, remembering. 'Mind you, Cloughie says all old people watch *Countdown*.'

'Mmm.' Ruth occasionally watches it herself but she's not going to let Nelson know that.

'Do you think he's left us a clue then?' says Nelson smiling.

'It's possible,' says Ruth, turning back to the fax paper to avoid looking at Nelson pretending to be a bear.

*

Ruth always over-complicates everything, thinks Nelson, as he drives back towards King's Lynn and home. It comes of being an academic. Mind you, when he first met her, he had needed her professional expertise. He'd called her in to look at the Iron Age body but he'd also asked her about some weird letters that had been sent to him, letters full of allusions to mythology, ritual and sacrifice. Ruth had done great work, looking up all the references and working out what the nutter was trying to say. But maybe that has left her unable to take anything at face value. Sometimes a list of books is just a list of books. That's what he says to his team. 'Don't make things too complicated. Nine times out of ten police work is about simple stuff. It was a car number-plate that caught the Yorkshire Ripper, tax evasion that caught Al Capone. Never skimp on routine procedure.' Mind you, he can't see Cloughie and co being tempted to be too intellectual.

Katie's a grand little kid though. He'd forgotten how much fun they are at that age. Michelle always used to tell him off for making the girls too excited at bedtime. He'd done the bear routine with them too, the old ones are the best. He remembers Laura, hysterical with laughter, falling off the bed and crying;

Rebecca screaming when he'd jumped out at her wearing a gorilla mask. Maybe Michelle had a point. He could see that it must have been irritating, stuck at home with young children, having to do all the discipline and boring bits, then having someone come home at bedtime pretending to be a bear. But, then again, he had to have *some* fun with them. In the early years he'd hardly seen his daughters during daylight hours. It'll be no different with Katie, he thinks. Worse because she won't even know who he is. He'll just be some lunatic stranger with funny voices and ingratiating presents. Cathbad will be more of a presence in her life than him. He grinds the gears furiously.

Michelle isn't home but, amazingly, Rebecca is. Even more amazingly, she's doing her homework. Admittedly, she's listening to her iPod, texting her friends and eating a cheese sandwich but she's also writing an essay entitled 'Coastal Erosion and its impact on Rural Communities'.

'What's this about, love?' he asks, dropping a kiss on her head.

'It's for environmental science. It's about all these people who're, like, getting really pissed off because their villages are disappearing.'

Nelson thinks of Jack Hastings who, by all accounts, is getting more than pissed off because Sea's End House is disappearing. Whitcliffe has shown him a surveyor's report condemning the house. Nelson thinks of the back garden, those few yards and then that vertiginous drop onto the rocks below. He tries to imagine how it would have been – a lawn, mown in those fancy stripes, roses, a sundial, Buster and Irene lounging in their deckchairs, drinking dry martinis, looking out over the cove. Will Jack be forced to leave the house his father built? He'll be pissed off then, all right. Could the strain of losing his house be enough to turn Jack Hastings into a killer?

As usual, Rebecca is flipping between several internet sites, looking for material. She's expert at cutting and pasting. Nelson hopes this will be enough for the A-Level examiners. She's too quick for him though, scanning to and fro, highlighting, dropping in text files, finding clip art—

'Hang on a second!'

'What?' She pauses in mid click.

'That last site. Something about the war.'

'Oh ... do you mean ilovehistory.com?'

‘Possibly. Can you go back?’

Obligingly, Rebecca finds the page and makes it large enough to be seen by his decrepit eyes.

The coastal defence, he reads, was to include fifty tons of fuel, to be blown up in the shallow waters of the North Sea. This operation drew on fire ships used by Drake against the Armada ...

He goes into the kitchen to ring Ruth, switching on the kettle as he does so. She takes a while to answer and sounds hassled. He can hear Katie crying in the background.

‘Ruth. Did you get the results back from the material? That you found in the barrel.’

‘Yes. I sent you a report.’

‘Tell me again.’

‘It was gun cotton. Cotton dowsed in nitric and sulphuric acid. The material’s immersed in the acid and then dried. Makes it extremely flammable.’

‘I bet.’

‘Apparently when it’s lit it produces an almighty blast. Jules Verne uses it in one of his books to power a space rocket.’

‘And what was in the other barrels?’

‘A mix of adhesive tar, lime and petrol.’

The beach at Broughton Sea’s End, thinks Nelson, as he drinks his tea, was one massive depth charge. The Home Guard had prepared a welcome for possible German invaders that would have blasted them into space. Was that the work of Ernst, the clever scientist? A German who had lived most of his life in Broughton Sea’s End. A German determined to do all he could to defeat the Nazis. Maybe he was a German Jew ... Nelson knows that all sorts of people were interned at the start of the war – old people, youngsters, Jews, communists – people who had no reason on earth to side with the Nazis. Why was Ernst living in Broughton in the first place? And why did he have such a close bond with Buster Hastings? *Buster kicked up such a fuss that he was released.* Why was Buster so determined to have Ernst on his side?

And why hadn’t the defences been set off when the six Germans actually landed? The men had been shot from a few feet away, there was no sign of a struggle. Somehow Buster and his mostly ageing troops had been able to overcome six soldiers in their physical prime. But, having done that, why kill them? Surely they could just have taken the men prisoner? He’s no

military expert but isn't it important to take prisoners so you can interrogate them? The German commandos never gave up their invasion plans. Their secret died with them, buried under the cliffs until the sea itself exposed it.

Nelson is still sitting in the kitchen when Michelle comes home, tired from working late and distinctly put out to find that no-one has started supper.

*

After supper, Michelle and Rebecca settle down to watch *CSI Miami* – female bonding over mutilated body parts – and Nelson escapes back to the study. He types *Second World War Invasion* into the search engine and soon the screen is full of lurid stories: beaches black with bodies, the seas aflame, U-boats full of severed limbs, secret German bases off the Irish coast, 30,000 bodies burned beyond recognition washed up on the South Coast. Nelson enjoys a conspiracy theory as much as the next man (once, Cathbad almost convinced him that the Americans had never landed on the moon), but as a policeman he does require just a trace of evidence. It's all very well saying that the authorities have covered everything up but could an invasion on this scale really have been hushed up? In a place like Broughton this would, effectively, have meant buying the silence of everyone in the village.

But what if this is exactly what happened? What if, amidst all the hysteria, the Germans did land one small expeditionary party in an isolated Norfolk cove? There they met, not sleepy villagers and bemused fishermen, but a tightly controlled army unit prepared to kill.

He is about to call it a night when, scrolling down a site called 'Flame Over Britain', he comes across this paragraph:

The plan was simple. Under cover of darkness several aged tankers, their holds full of combustible fuel, would head across the channel to the enemy invasion ports of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne. At the entrance to these ports, the tankers would be abandoned by their skeleton crews and detonated. The subsequent blast would turn the sea into a burning sheet of flame. This operation, which became known

as Operation Lucid, actually started life with a more sinister moniker – Operation Lucifer.

Lucifer.

CHAPTER 20

‘Remind me what we’re doing here again, boss?’

Nelson and Judy are climbing the steps to the church of St Barnabas at Broughton Sea’s End. It’s a bitterly cold morning and the gravestones are covered with a fine layer of frost. The weather forecasters are talking about snow. In late March! What a county, thinks Nelson, forgetting that Blackpool hardly enjoys a Caribbean climate. He thinks of Norfolk as existing in a vacuum, entirely separate from the rest of England. Come to think of it, that’s how most of the locals see it too.

Judy is standing looking up at a huge evergreen tree whose branches cover almost the entire graveyard. In its shade the frost is even thicker.

‘We’re here,’ says Nelson, rubbing his hands together, ‘because the vicar has copies of the parish magazine going back to the year dot.’

‘Sounds wild.’

‘Wild or not, I want to find out what was happening in this village during the war. I’m convinced that Operation Lucifer is the key to this whole case.’

‘Don’t say that name out loud,’ hisses Judy.

Nelson laughs. ‘Not getting superstitious in your old age are you?’

But there is, nevertheless, something spooky about the silent graveyard. The way the stones stick up as if something below the earth is stirring, the way the dark tree spreads its branches, the way the church door is bolted shut.

A figure appears from behind one of the largest stones. Judy screams.

‘Forgive me if I startled you.’ The figure resolves itself into a tall, white-haired man wearing clerical clothes. Nelson gives Judy a disgusted look.

‘Father Tom Weston.’ The man extends his hand.

‘DCI Nelson.’ Nelson shakes hands briskly. ‘This is Detective Sergeant Johnson. It’s good of you to meet us.’

‘Not at all. I’m delighted that someone wants to look in the archives. There’s not enough interest in local history.’

He takes out a medieval-looking key.

‘Do you always keep the church locked?’ asks Judy.

‘Have to, I’m afraid. We’ve got some very valuable things in here – candlesticks, brasses, and so on – and I don’t live on site. I’ve got three other parishes to look after.’

It is almost as cold inside the church as out. Judy blows on her hands to warm them and her breath billows like incense. The air smells of stone and damp and flower stalks. Someone has evidently been arranging the flowers because a magnificent display of lilies and ferns stands at the altar steps. Judy thinks of the red roses on Buster Hastings’ grave. She must remember to see if they’re still there.

As they cross the church, their feet echo on the stone flags. Passing the altar, Judy bobs instinctively. Nelson gives her a sardonic glance, correctly identifying Catholic Genuflecting Syndrome. Judy scowls.

Tom Weston leads them past wooden pews with embroidered kneelers, past a garish collage of Noah’s Ark (the work of the Sunday School apparently) and through a door at the back of the church. This is obviously behind-the-scenes. There are piles of hymn books, a broken lectern, mops, buckets and one of those vacuum cleaners with a smiley face. ‘Henry,’ says Father Tom. ‘I couldn’t live without Henry.’

‘Do you do the cleaning yourself?’ asks Nelson.

‘I have to sometimes. Good cleaners are hard to find.’

He does everything himself, they find out. He cleans, polishes, makes cakes for the Women’s Institute, even runs the mother-and-baby group. There’s a man who cuts the grass in the graveyard but that’s it.

‘Are you married?’ asks Nelson. He assumed that vicars have wives that run their parishes for them. It’s one of the advantages of being a protestant.

‘I’m a widower,’ says Tom Weston, opening a cupboard at the back of the room. ‘Daphne died five years ago.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s all right. It gets easier. At least I know she’s in a better place.’

Faith must be handy sometimes, thinks Nelson, bending over the box of dusty magazines. His own vague Catholicism would never survive a real test – like something happening to Michelle

or one of his daughters. He resists a temptation to cross himself to ward off this dreadful thought. Reflex action, like Johnson curtseying at the altar. How cross she'd been when he noticed.

The magazines are actually quite well-ordered, arranged in boxes according to year. Nelson starts on 1940, while Judy looks at 1939. Nelson is convinced that the Germans must have come ashore in the early years of the war, when the invasion scare was at its height.

'I'll go and make some coffee,' says Father Tom. 'There's a gas ring at the back here.'

Nelson watches the vicar blow dust from an ancient jar of instant coffee. There's instant milk too. Ruth would have a fit. She only likes poncy coffee in tiny cups.

Judy settles down on the floor to leaf through copies of the *Broughton and Rockham Parish News*.

'There's a recipe here for squirrel pie.'

'Very popular during the war,' says the vicar from the back of the room. 'Some of the old country folk still cook squirrel.'

'How long have you been in this parish?' asks Nelson.

'Since 1952. The year before the great flood.' He makes it sound like Noah's flood. Perhaps the Sunday School will make a collage of it.

'Flood?' echoes Nelson.

'Yes. Terrible affair. Constant rain, the seas rose, rivers burst their banks. We had boats sailing down the High Street at Broughton. Five people died.'

'I've heard about the flood,' says Judy. 'It was supposed to happen again wasn't it?'

'In 2006,' agrees Father Tom. 'I remember them testing out the sirens. It brought it all back. We had a prayer cycle in all the Norfolk churches. And the flood never came.'

'I thought that was because 2006 was a particularly hot summer,' says Judy. Father Tom appears not to hear this.

'I should be retired by now,' he says, placing two steaming mugs on a packing case marked 'Palms'. 'But vicars are thin on the ground these days.'

'Do you remember hearing stories about the war years in Broughton?' asks Nelson, putting aside a magazine that seems to consist only of recipes for powdered egg.

'Some stories,' says the vicar carefully. 'They're close around

these parts, don't talk much to outsiders.' He laughs. 'And after fifty odd years I'm still an outsider.'

"*Sea's End House commandeered by the army,*" reads Nelson. "*Buster Hastings, Captain of the Local Defence Volunteers, confirmed that his house was to be used for secret war work.*" Do you know what all that was about? The Local Defence Volunteers, they became the Home Guard, right?

'That's right. Buster Hastings was in charge of the Home Guard. A bit of a martinet by all accounts. I'm not sure about the secret war work but I think I remember hearing that the house was used for surveillance, watching the sea. The lighthouse was in use then, of course, and they had a system of warning lights. And, of course, there was the listening post at Beeston Bump.'

'Beeston Bump?' Judy tries, not very successfully, to stifle a giggle.

'Great name, isn't it?' Father Tom smiles, showing long yellow teeth. 'It's a hill outside Sheringham. It's where the Y station was, the listening post. Beautiful spot. We have open air church services there at Easter.'

'Sounds lovely,' says Nelson. 'How well do you know the Hastings family?'

'Quite well,' says Tom Weston, taking a sip of coffee. Nelson tries his; it's quite disgusting. 'Buster wasn't much of a churchgoer but his wife Irene was a stalwart of the parish for years. She still does the flowers.' Judy stores this nugget away.

'What about Jack Hastings?' asks Nelson.

'He always supports our fundraisers. We need a new roof for the tower. It leaks dreadfully. We've been collecting for years but we're no nearer to reaching our total. Oh well, God doesn't give up easily. Jack doesn't come to services much, but his wife Stella is a regular communicant. She's a good woman.'

Nelson senses that this is high praise from Father Tom. It seems that Hastings men delegated churchgoing to their wives.

'What about Archie Whitcliffe?' he asks. 'Did you know him?'

'Archie?' Father Tom's face softens. 'A grand old chap. He used to be one of the bellringers here. When we could still use the belfry, that is. I was sad to hear that he'd been taken.'

Been taken. It seems an odd phrase to use, even for a vicar.

'How did you know?' asked Nelson.

'His grandson rang me. Wanted me to conduct the funeral, but I

understand that there's been some sort of delay.'

His eyes move from Nelson to Judy, who is still reading about wartime dances and keeping a pig in your back garden. Despite his years, and Father Tom must be at least eighty, his gaze is remarkably shrewd.

'Yes,' says Nelson straightening up. 'Can we take the rest of these magazines away with us?'

In the churchyard, Judy remembers to check Buster Hastings' grave. The roses have gone but now there is a bunch of spring flowers, tied in a straw bow. Clearly someone in the village still remembers the martinet with affection. Nelson and Father Tom have stopped in front of the war memorial. Nelson scans the names; many from the First World War, fewer from the second. One of the latter names, Geoffrey Austin, rings a slight bell. Didn't one of the Home Guard have a son who was killed at Dunkirk?

'I'm campaigning to have a new name added,' says Father Tom. 'One of the local boys who died in Afghanistan. The War Graves Commission isn't keen but I think we'll win through in the end.'

Nelson does not doubt Father Tom's ability to defeat the War Graves Commission. He has a feeling that Father Tom, like God, does not give up easily.

Judy comments on the tree, whose dark branches still make her feel slightly uneasy.

'It's a yew,' says Father Tom. 'They're traditionally found in graveyards. This one has been here for hundreds of years, since medieval times.'

'Why are they found in graveyards?' asks Judy, wrapping her coat around her. The sun is higher now but it's still very cold.

'They're evergreens, linked to immortality. There's an old superstition that at midnight, the witching hour you know, the yew provides a kind of conduit for the dead to rise.'

Complete bollocks, thinks Nelson. But where has he heard that phrase recently? *The witching hour*?

'The yew's a sacred tree for druids,' Father Tom is saying. 'If you know of any druids, that is.' He laughs heartily.

'We know one,' says Nelson.

They walk back to the car park in silence, each carrying a box of magazines. Nelson is thinking of Operation Lucifer, the sea in flames. There is nothing in the dull parish newsletters to suggest anything so terrifying or so memorable. According to the *Broughton and Rockham Parish News* the war years had been one long round of dances and rabbit shows (Flesh and Fur Fancy: Beat the Nazis by eating coney pie). But something had happened in this quiet village and Archie's last word had been 'Lucifer'. He really must have a good look through Hugh Anselm's papers.

Judy, for no reason at all, is thinking about Cathbad and yew trees.

They have come in Judy's car because Nelson's is in for its MOT. Judy, in the face of much teasing, drives a four-by-four, a flashy jeep with wheels like a tractor. As Nelson climbs into the passenger seat, he says, 'This car's too big for you.'

'It suits me fine.'

'What does Darren drive?'

'A Ford Ka.'

Nelson grunts as if his worst fears have been confirmed.

They drive along the coast road, Nelson trying not to tell Judy when to change gear (in fact, she's a far better driver than he is).

'Johnson!'

'What?' Judy brakes.

'Let's go to Sheringham. Have a look at this listening post thing.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I just want to have a look at it.'

As Judy does a U-turn she considers that the boss is getting really hung up on this war business. It's true that whoever killed Archie Whitcliffe and Hugh Anselm (not to mention Dieter Eckhart) probably knew about Operation Lucifer but, in Judy's personal opinion, the truth must lie closer to home and to the present day. Don't overcomplicate; that's what Nelson himself usually says.

Beeston Bump turns out to be a long walk. A stunning one too, if you like that sort of thing, which Nelson doesn't. But Judy enjoys striding over the short, aromatic grass, the wide blue sky above and the sea thundering away below. It's a long haul, though, and they're both panting by the time they reach the top. The view, as Father Tom promised, is spectacular. The flat plains

of Norfolk lie behind them, they can even see the church tower at Broughton and Sea's End House perched on the end of its promontory. In front of them is the sea, calm and clear.

All that remains of the listening post is an octagonal concrete base. Hard to imagine a building here, on this exposed point. A tower, Stella Hastings had said. Nelson looks out over the sea, sparkling innocently in the sun. How crowded it must have been seventy years ago – German E-boats, tankers stuffed full of petrol ready to ignite, Captain Hastings and his crew patrolling in their little dinghy. And, of course, the six Germans who died at Broughton Sea's End. What happened to their boat, he wonders. Father Tom had shown them a map of the East Norfolk coast. It was studded with little crosses. 'What are these?' Nelson had asked. 'Shipwrecks,' answered Father Tom. 'The coast is full of them. It's treacherous, this coastline, lots of dangerous rocks, shallow sandbanks. That's why we had the sea light at Broughton. You can't land a boat on some beaches because of all the submerged wrecks.' So, even under the sea, it's crowded.

His phone rings. Ruth.

'What is it?'

'I think I've come up with something.' She sounds excited. 'Can you come over?'

Nelson glances at Judy who is gazing rather dreamily out to sea. Probably thinking about her fiancé.

'Okay. I've got Johnson with me. We'll be over in half an hour.'

*

Ruth meets them at the door. To Nelson's secret delight, she's holding Kate.

'Hi, baby,' says Judy. 'Hey, she smiled at me!'

That was at me, thinks Nelson.

Ruth takes them into her sitting room which is as untidy as ever and where, now, Kate's toys and blankets and baby gym jostle for space with Ruth's books and papers and old coffee cups. Spread out on the table are a selection of murder mysteries. Skulls, daggers and spectral hounds grin up at them.

'I bought them from Amazon,' says Ruth. 'They're the books on Archie's list. The ones he left to Maria.'

'Why did you buy them?' asks Nelson, watching surreptitiously

as Kate rolls on the floor under her baby gym. Shouldn't she be crawling by now? He can't remember any of the milestones though Michelle has them all recorded in albums, complete with first teeth and locks of baby hair.

'I wanted to see if I could crack the code. I thought it would be easier if I had the actual books.'

'What code?' asks Judy.

'Well, you remember the order Archie told Maria to read the books in? I think it was a code. I think he was trying to send her a message.'

'Have you worked it out?' asks Judy, her eyes round.

'I think so.' Ruth arranged the books on the table as if she is laying out Patience – or a magic trick. Judy leans forward, interested. Nelson wrenches his eyes away from Kate.

'Look. First I tried putting the books in the order Archie said. That puts *Evil Under the Sun* first. But then there are four twos in a row. It doesn't make sense. So then I thought: what if it's the third word?'

'What do you mean?' asks Judy.

'Well, the third word of the first title is Truth.' Ruth shuffles the books. 'The second word of the second title is Lies.'

'Truth and Lies,' says Nelson. 'That's deep.'

Ruth glares at him. 'The second word of the third title is Under.'

'I get it!' says Judy. 'Truth Lies Under.'

'Yes! The second word of the fourth title is Fourth.'

'Truth Lies Under Fourth,' says Nelson. 'What the hell does that mean?'

'The second word of the fifth title is Step. The third word of the sixth is Of. The first word of the seventh is Sea. The second of the eighth title is Light. Truth Lies Under Fourth Step Of Sea Light.'

There is a silence. Under the baby gym, Kate coos and chortles. Flint climbs onto the table and sits on the Sherlock Holmes book, purring loudly.

'What's a sea light?' asks Judy

Nelson hears Father Tom's voice, echoing in the dusty back room. *It's treacherous, this coastline, lots of dangerous rocks, shallow sandbanks. That's why we had the sea light at Broughton.*

'The lighthouse,' he says. 'It means the lighthouse. Under the fourth step of the lighthouse.'

CHAPTER 21

April

The lighthouse. Ruth stares out of her office window, across the courtyard towards the artificial lake, and thinks about the impending trip to the sea light. It has already been put off twice because of bad weather and is now set for Saturday.

‘Why don’t you come?’ Nelson had said on the phone. ‘It’s the weekend, after all.’ How can he say that so casually? Doesn’t he know that, *because* it’s the weekend, Ruth is kept a prisoner by Kate? Of course he doesn’t. Michelle has always done all the childcare and Nelson is as free as he ever was. Ruth imagines him at weekends, playing football or golf, going to the pub, with never a thought as to who is looking after his children. Of course, his daughters (his *other* daughters) are grown up now. He and Michelle can even go away on holiday together, not that Nelson seems to enjoy holidays but whose fault is that? The point is, he has escaped from the parenting years and Ruth is just beginning. In only eighteen years’ time, she tells herself hollowly, I can go out on a Saturday.

The thing is she *wants* to go to the lighthouse. It was her idea, after all. She cracked the code and now she has to sit at home while Judy or Clough goes out on the police launch, climbs the precarious steps and finds ... what? Does she really believe that there’s something hidden below the fourth step of the Broughton Sea’s End lighthouse? What could it possibly be? The truth, according to the code, but as an archaeologist Ruth knows that truth can prove remarkably elusive as the years go by. Is it a confession? A photograph? Another cryptic clue? Maybe Archie has set up a whole series of clues that will have them running all over the country, untangling acronyms and decoding acrostics, while the real murderer slips silently out of sight.

She pictures the lighthouse. It’s a real landmark on the North East Norfolk coast, commemorated in countless postcards and souvenirs. The tall red-and-white tower perched on a rock, seeming sometimes to rise straight out of the sea. Photos show it shrouded by mist on autumn mornings, almost hidden by

crashing waves during winter storms and mirrored on a flat sea at the height of summer. The lighthouse is only a few hundred metres from the land but it is surrounded by rocks, making it almost impossible to reach except in calm weather. This is one of the reasons why the light is no longer in use. The main reason is that most ships nowadays are equipped with satellite navigation and have no need of picturesque lighthouses.

Ruth sighs and tries to get back to marking essays. She knows that she is behaving like a spoilt child, sulking because she's missing a day out. The trouble is that knowing doesn't make it easier to bear. She wants to go to the lighthouse, but Sandra is away for the weekend and Shona is spending Saturday with Phil and his sons and there is no-one to look after Kate. Tatjana is out on Saturday with the people from UEA but Ruth would never dream of asking her to babysit. No, Ruth will just have to stay at home like a good mother. Maybe she can bake a cake or something.

She looks out of the window again, remembering the day that she saw Clara and Dieter embracing in the snow. Then, as if summoned by the earlier memory, she sees a blonde woman walking across the courtyard, her arms full of books. Clara. Without thinking about it, Ruth taps on the window. Clara looks up, smiles. Ruth beckons. She could do with a break, some company, a cup of coffee. It'll stop her thinking about the lighthouse, unbreakable codes, Saturday morning telly.

Clara looks cold and rather forlorn, wearing a scruffy waxed jacket that has clearly seen many years of dog walking. Her hair is lank and rather greasy and her face is pale. Ruth feels a sudden stab of sympathy. She hasn't given much thought to what Clara must be feeling, losing her lover, realising that, in fact, she never had him. At least Dieter's wife will have a funeral to attend, a grave to visit, all the status and sympathy accorded to a widow. Clara is left with nothing.

'Do you fancy a coffee?' Ruth asks as Clara appears in the doorway. 'We can go to the canteen or there's a machine that's not too bad.'

'Machine will be fine,' says Clara. 'I'm just returning some of Dieter's books to the library.' She puts the pile of books on Ruth's desk. Ruth can't resist looking at the titles – Second World War history mostly, one treatise on the dating of bodies. Was Dieter

doing his own forensic research then?

‘How are you?’ Ruth asks. ‘This must be an awful time for you.’

Clara shrugs. ‘I’ve been better. I know it’s stupid because I’d only known him a few weeks but I really loved him, and to think that someone would kill him ... like that ...’ She puts her hand over her mouth.

‘It must be awful,’ repeats Ruth inadequately. Clara burrows in her bag for a tissue and Ruth takes the opportunity to escape to the coffee machine. Clara probably wants a few minutes on her own, she tells herself.

When she returns with two steamy cups of coffee substitute, Clara seems a lot more composed. She tells Ruth quite calmly that Dieter’s wife has flown his body back to Germany. ‘I didn’t see her,’ she says. ‘I don’t think she knows anything about me.’

Did you know about her? wonders Ruth. But she doesn’t say anything.

‘The hardest thing,’ Clara goes on, ‘is not having anything to do. I haven’t got a job. I’m not studying. All my friends have moved away. All I can do is take the dogs for walks, chat to Grandma, get in Mum’s way in the kitchen. It’s like being a teenager again.’

Maybe it’s the word teenager that gives Ruth the idea. What do teenagers do to fill in the time? They take odd jobs, don’t they? Washing cars, delivering papers ... didn’t Clara once say something about babysitting?

‘I’d love to,’ says Clara, looking cheerful for the first time. ‘I’m not doing anything on Saturday afternoon. I’d love to look after Kate.’

‘I shouldn’t be long,’ says Ruth. ‘Nelson says the boat’s leaving at two-thirty. I should be home by five at the latest.’

‘Boat?’

‘Yes, we’re going out to the lighthouse. It’s hard to explain but it’s all linked to the bodies that we found in the cliffs.’

‘The lighthouse?’ says Clara. ‘Dad owns it, I think.’

*

When Saturday comes, Ruth almost changes her mind. The sea is calm but the skies are heavy and overcast. Snow is forecast and there is an ominous yellow line on the horizon. But Clara appears

promptly at one-thirty, full of plans for a fun afternoon with Kate, so Ruth has no choice but to put on her anorak and head out to the car. Clara stands at the window, waving, with Kate in her arms. For a moment, Ruth feels an almost overwhelming urge to rush back into the house, grab her baby and never let her go again. But, she reasons, she experiences a modified version of this urge every time she leaves Kate with Sandra. If she obeyed every irrational maternal impulse she'd never leave the house.

Ruth drives slowly along the coast road. Sometimes, in spring, you see groups of birdwatchers, binoculars in hand, trekking over the windblown grass in the hope of seeing a greenshank or a bar-tailed godwit. But, today, the Saltmarsh is deserted. There is a feeling of tension, almost expectancy, in the air. The grey-green reeds are sharply defined against the pale sky, a flock of snipe zigzags low over the road, water gleams between the ditches, dark and forbidding. Ruth turns on her car radio. Nothing like *Any Questions?* for driving away feelings of impending doom.

She is due to meet Nelson at Wyncham, along the coast from Broughton. There is a jetty there and steps leading down to the beach. The police launch will come from Yarmouth and take them on the ten-minute trip to the lighthouse. As Ruth rounds the last bend, she sees the lighthouse rising starkly out of the grey sea. As she looks across the water, it seems to her that there is a flash of light from its high windows. Impossible; the light was taken away years ago, it is probably just a chance reflection. But Ruth feels uneasy. Why on earth did she ever want to go on this trip?

Nelson is waiting for her by the steps, accompanied by a man carrying what looks like a pneumatic drill. There is a third man too, someone short but very upright, bouncing on his toes as he looks out across the water. Can it really be ... ? Yes it can. Ruth parks her car on the grass at the top of the cliff next to Nelson's Mercedes and an old-style Jaguar that looks as if it has been preserved in aspic. Trust Jack Hastings to buy British.

'Ruth! You made it.' Nelson manages to give the impression that she's late though it is still only twenty past.

'Hallo, Nelson, Mr Hastings.'

'Jack, please.' Hastings is wearing a yellow sou'wester and seems full of bonhomie. 'Fine day for a cruise,' he says as he leads the way down the wooden steps. The launch is waiting by the

jetty. It's a lot smaller than Ruth expected.

'Turns out Mr Hastings owns the lighthouse,' says Nelson. 'Lock, stock and barrel.'

'Only way to stop it being demolished,' says Hastings. 'I couldn't let that happen. Valuable part of our maritime heritage. Not that the government cares, of course.'

'What are you going to do with it?' asks Ruth. She is sure she read somewhere about decommissioned lighthouses being turned into museums or even bed-and-breakfasts.

'Do?' Hastings turns to look at her. 'I'm not going to do anything. It's perfect as it is.'

Ruth looks across at the sleek stone tower that seems almost part of the rocks around it. She thinks she knows what Jack Hastings means. As she watches, the sun is once more reflected from the top windows – two flashes, like a signal.

Ruth wonders how much Nelson has told Jack Hastings about today's expedition. She is considering how to find out when Nelson says, rather repressively, 'I've told Mr Hastings about your theory concerning the lighthouse.'

Ruth notes 'your theory'. In other words, if the whole thing is a waste of time, it'll be Ruth's fault.

'Jolly good fun,' Hastings says, over his shoulder. 'Like something from an Arthur Ransome book.'

'Let's get on with it,' says Nelson. 'The tide'll turn in a minute.' They have had to wait until high tide so that most of the rocks will be under water. Nelson hates waiting for anything though time and tide, as Ruth could have told him, wait for no man.

A boatman in an RNLI jersey holds the craft steady as they clamber on board. It pitches alarmingly and, too late, Ruth remembers that, while she loves the sea, she hates boats.

From the shore the sea had looked completely flat, but as soon as they are away from the jetty, waves appear from nowhere and the little boat struggles against them. Ruth's stomach lurches in sympathy. Oh God, what if she's sick all over Nelson? Hastings, clinging to the rail with one hand, seems to be enjoying himself.

'Great fun!' he shouts, above the noise of the engine.

A wave crashes over the prow. Ruth cowers inside the little glass cabin. What will happen to Kate if she is drowned? She really must make a will.

The lighthouse is getting nearer. Close up it looks more

derelict, rusty tears running down its sides. The rocks make it difficult to land. The launch pitches to and fro as the waves wash up over its sides. Ruth clamps her teeth together. Eventually, though, the skipper manages to get them close enough for his mate to jump ashore. He ties the boat onto the little landing jetty and stretches out a hand to help Ruth. Praying that she doesn't slip, she puts one foot on the side of the wildly rocking boat. Thank God she wore trainers. She manages an ungainly leap onto the rocks. It feels wonderful to be on solid ground.

Nelson jumps easily, he's surprisingly nimble for such a big man, but Hastings stumbles and nearly falls.

'Careful,' says the crewman cheerfully. 'If you fell in, we probably wouldn't be able to get you out again.'

An iron ladder leads from the jetty up to the lighthouse. Are these the steps referred to in the code? Ruth looks doubtfully at the rusty metal. How could anything be buried under here?

Nelson doesn't waste any time. He climbs the ladder, hand over hand, and disappears from view. Ruth follows, more slowly. She can hear Hastings behind her, breathing hard. The third man brings up the rear, struggling with the heavy drill.

Now they are standing looking up at the lighthouse itself and Ruth sees that there are more steps, concrete slabs leading up to the heavily barred door. They all stand there in silence for a minute. Seagulls call plaintively from the surrounding rocks. Ruth thinks of stories of lighthouse keepers sent mad by loneliness and wild weather. Though they are not far from land, the shore is misty and uncertain. Easy to imagine yourself miles from the world.

There are nine steps. 'Any idea if it's fourth step from the top or fourth step from the bottom?' asks Nelson, rather sardonically.

Ruth shakes her head, pulling her anorak tighter. It is colder than ever.

'Let's try fourth from bottom,' says Nelson. 'We need to get going before the weather gets any worse. Take it away, Charlie.'

The man puts on ear-muffs and points the drill at the fourth step. There is an explosion of noise. Dust fills the air and the seagulls fly away, cawing angrily.

The concrete breaks easily. Nelson doesn't wait for more. He kneels down and starts pulling away the rubble with his bare hands.

‘Is there anything there?’ shouts Ruth.

‘I think ... yes, there’s a box.’ He leans into the hole.

‘Hang on,’ says Ruth, her forensic instincts outraged. ‘You can’t do that. You have to plot the find, note exactly where it is.’

Nelson ignores her. He reaches and straightens up, holding something that looks like a steel container, about the size of a shoe box. It seems unaffected by its sojourn underground; the metal gleams dully in the muted sunshine.

‘What is it?’ asks Ruth.

‘It looks like a radio case,’ says Hastings. ‘I’ve seen one like it before. Survival radios, they were called. The boxes were stainless steel. My father had one in the war.’

Nelson shakes the box. Ruth winces.

‘There’s something inside,’ he says.

‘Is there a key?’ asks Hastings.

‘I’m not bugging about looking for a key,’ says Nelson. He drops the box onto the ground, grabs the drill and aims it at the lid.

‘Stop!’ yells Ruth. ‘You might damage whatever’s inside. And you should be wearing gloves.’

Nelson looks at her darkly but he puts down the drill and asks Charlie if he can borrow his protective gloves. Then he tries the lid. It opens.

‘Well, I’m blowed,’ says Hastings. ‘It wasn’t even locked.’

Ruth leans forward as Nelson lifts something from the box. It is black and round, rather like a miniature steering wheel.

‘What is it?’ asks Ruth.

Again, it is Hastings who answers.

‘It’s a ciné film.’

*

Jack Hastings invites them back to his house to screen the film. It turns out he has an old-fashioned projector. ‘I like old sixteen-millimetre films, it’s a hobby of mine. Of course, you could have it converted to DVD but that would take time.’

Nelson hesitates. He knows he should take the film back to the station and have it converted but the excitement of finding it has made him reckless. He can’t bear to wait another second without knowing what is on the film so carefully hidden and so cunningly

traced. It's almost as if Archie Whitcliffe is urging him on, congratulating him (okay, Ruth) for having cracked the code, for following the clues all the way from the dusty paperbacks to the steps of the lighthouse. Who hid the film, he wonders. Archie? Or Hugh, the lifeboatman?

'The film might be damaged,' he says, 'but I suppose we could try.'

'That's the spirit,' applauds Hastings.

They are standing on the cliff top beside their cars. The launch has chugged off back to Yarmouth. The sky is still the same yellowy-white. It is four o'clock.

'Will you be joining us, Dr Galloway?' asks Hastings politely.

Ruth hesitates. 'I should get back.'

'Oh, Clara won't mind hanging on a bit longer,' says Hastings. 'Ring her.'

Ruth rings Clara who says she's happy to stay for another hour or two. 'We're having a lovely time. We've built lots of towers, listened to music and done some finger painting.' Ruth feels inadequate. She's never painted with Kate. And she notes that Clara's played Kate music instead of plonking her in front of the telly to watch *In the Night Garden*. Clara is obviously far better at the baby stuff than she is.

They drive in convoy back to Sea's End House. As they reach the gates the snow starts to fall.

'I should go back,' says Ruth.

'Oh, it won't settle,' says Hastings airily. 'I'm always right about the weather.'

CHAPTER 22

The projector is in Hastings' study, a book-lined room with cracked leather sofas and two large dog beds. There is a fire and it is altogether cosier than the glacial drawing room. Ruth stands by the fireplace trying to warm her hands. The smell of dog and wood-smoke fills the air. Hastings draws the red velvet curtains and starts to fiddle with the projector, the sort seen in old films, two wheels with tape running between them. A huge screen is pulled down in front of the books and Stella Hastings comes in with tea and biscuits.

'Did you ever see such weather for April?' she says.

'Do you think it will get worse?' asks Ruth anxiously. The room is too warm and womb-like. She can see herself settling down on one on the sofas and never getting up again. She must get home to Kate.

'No, it won't last,' says Stella soothingly.

Stella backs out. The projector starts to whirr, circles with numbers inside appear on the screen. 8,7,6,5,4,3,2. Then, with what feels like shocking suddenness, a face appears. A dark-haired young man with little round glasses.

'What I am about to say,' he intones, 'is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

The man is dressed in uniform. Ruth isn't good at uniforms but she thinks that she sees wings above his pocket. RAF? The man sits close to the camera and looks nervous. Occasionally he glances anxiously at the operator, who is unseen. At one point the camera pans slowly round the room, showing a blacked-out window, a notice board, a furred Union Jack.

'Do you recognise the room?' Nelson asks Hastings.

'I'm not sure. It could be the old scout hut. The Home Guard used to meet there.'

'My name is Hugh P. Anselm,' the man is saying, pushing his glasses closer to his eyes. 'I'm a pilot officer in the RAF. Until recently, I was a member of the Home Guard at Broughton Sea's End.' He licks his lips and looks at the camera operator. 'What I am about to tell you occurred in the early hours of September the eighth, 1940. My colleagues and I took a blood oath never to

divulge the events of that night. Accordingly, this message is only to be made public after my death and the death of my comrade Archibald Whitcliffe.'

'Archibald!' says an amused off-screen voice. Archie Whitcliffe is clearly the man behind the camera. Hugh Anselm ignores the interruption. He is speaking more fluently now, leaning in urgently.

'We will hide this message where it will not be found. When the time comes we will leave coded instructions as to its whereabouts. The story I have to tell is an unedifying one. Perhaps it will seem incomprehensible to the generations that come after us. I can only ask that you remember three things: it was war, we were scared and we were led by a very singular man.'

Ruth glances at Jack Hastings who is sitting behind the projector. He is leaning forward, his hand covering his mouth.

'On September the seventh, 1940,' says Hugh Anselm, glancing down briefly at his notes, 'the GHQ Home Forces received the codeword "Cromwell". This meant that an invasion was probable within the next twelve hours. Captain Hastings put our platoon on full alert. We had already placed the defences along the coastal strip; we had a fire ship moored off the beach, ready to ignite. At eleven p.m. three of us, under the command of Sergeant Austin, went out in the patrol boat. At midnight, we returned. At two a.m., just as we were preparing for another recce, our lookout in the tower signalled "enemy approaching", three long flashes of the torch, two short. Captain Hastings and Sergeant Austin went down to the beach.

'The rest of the platoon waited at the top of the cliff path. We saw a boat approaching, a small craft with an outboard motor, though that was silent. It was being rowed. We saw at once that it was moving slowly, only one man was rowing. The boat made its landing. Its occupants got out and we saw that two of the men were carrying a body. There were six men in total. Captain Hastings went down to the water's edge, raised his gun and ordered them to stop in the name of the King. They obeyed at once, putting up their hands. The leader spoke, in accented English. He gave his name as Karl von Kronig, a captain in the German army. He and his men were commandos on a reconnaissance mission. They had been hit by coastal artillery.

One of his men was seriously injured. Captain Hastings signalled to us to put the men under arrest. We had been issued with ropes though we had hardly thought that they would submit so easily. We tied the men's hands and led them up the ramp and into the summer house, at the very end of the garden at Sea's End House. Donald had the key. Private Whitcliffe and I carried the injured man. He was groaning and we saw that he had been shot.

'In the summer house, there was a difference of opinion. Sergeant Austin, who had recently lost his son, wanted to shoot all six men. He had an old service revolver and I remember him brandishing it as he spoke. I spoke up, although as a private I hardly had the right. I said the men were prisoners of war and that it was our duty to take them into custody and find help for the injured man. I'm sure I spoke pompously and Captain Hastings was angry. He told me to hold my tongue. He pointed his gun at Von Kronig and asked if there were any other Germans in the vicinity. No, said Von Kronig, who was tall and blond with an air of command. They were simply a reconnaissance party. Captain Hastings told the man that Germany would never win the war. Von Kronig smiled and said that he thought they had won it already. Then Sergeant Austin shot him.

'He died immediately. Sergeant Austin was a crack shot. The other Germans shouted out but Captain Hastings pointed his gun at them and told them to be quiet. Captain Hastings gave his gun to Corporal Hoffman and told him to cover the men and let us know what they were saying (Corporal Hoffman was born in Germany). He led the rest of us outside and told us that we would have to kill the rest of the men. They would tell the authorities about the killing of their captain and we had to protect Sergeant Austin. Besides, we were at war and they were the enemy. We had to shoot them and bury their bodies. I protested but Captain Hastings told me to be quiet. Danny tried to back me up but Donald said they were only filthy Jerries and would do the same to us. Eventually, to my everlasting shame, I acquiesced.

'We led out the four men who could stand. Four of us held them, their hands still tied behind their backs. They did not know what was happening, mercifully for them. Then Captain Hastings went behind them and shot each one in the back of the neck and went inside to shoot the sick man. None of us spoke. The wind was high and I don't believe that anyone heard the shots. Sea's

End House is very isolated. One of the men called on God before he died. I remembered that and, afterwards, I put my rosary into his hands.

‘Captain Hastings told us to take the men down to the beach and bury them. There is a cleft in the cliffs, inaccessible except at low tide. Archie, Danny and I each carried one of the bodies. The others were dragged on a length of canvas, we’d used it earlier to make gun cotton. We burnt the boat on the shore. By now it was dawn and I will never forget seeing the sun rise on that morning and realising that I was a murderer. Archie and I had the job of filling in the grave and that is when I put my rosary into the German soldier’s hands. God forgive me, I have not said the rosary since.

‘At about six a.m. we went back to the summer house. Captain Hastings took out his knife and made a cut on each of our hands. One by one, we pressed our hands together so that the blood mingled and we swore never to divulge what had happened to a living soul. Then we went back to the house and Mrs Hastings made us breakfast.’

Hugh Anselm takes a deep breath and pushes at his glasses again. He looks so young, thinks Ruth. Eighteen? Nineteen?

‘Private Whitcliffe and I will honour the oath we made,’ he says, ‘but we both feel that, one day, the truth should be known. We have only told one other person that this film exists. The last of the three of us left alive will leave instructions as to where to find this evidence. That is all I have to say. God have mercy on us all.’

The film stops abruptly.

Jack Hastings is the first to speak. ‘My brother, Tony, heard the shots,’ he says. ‘He told me about it. He says he heard shooting and saw black shapes in the garden. People carrying bodies. I didn’t believe him. He can only have been about three at the time.’

Ruth imagines the little boy at the nursery window, the figures moving in the dark, the sound of heavy boots on the path, the muffled oaths, the flames from the burning boat.

‘We always thought that the summer house was haunted,’ Hastings continues. ‘Mother wouldn’t let us go in there because it was so near to the cliff edge.’

‘Are you going to tell your mother about this?’ asks Nelson,

jerking his head towards the blank screen.

Hastings looks troubled. 'I don't know. She has a right to know, I suppose, but my mother worshipped my father. This could kill her. She has no idea about any of this.'

Ruth thinks of Hugh Anselm saying 'Mrs Hastings made us breakfast'. Did Irene Hastings really not know that she was feeding men who had just committed murder? Did her husband never tell her what happened that night?

'I never imagined ...' Jack Hastings looks genuinely shocked, his hands shaking as he turns off the projector. 'I never imagined anything like this. I knew there was something. My dad sometimes talked about the Home Guard and it was never cosy stuff, never anything like the TV programme. He always said that they were ready for an invasion, that they would have fought to the death. But I never thought ...'

'Did you ever suspect that this evidence existed?'

Hastings shakes his head. 'No, never.' He sits down, looking as if he'll never move again.

'I've got to go,' says Ruth. The ugly Thirties clock on the mantelpiece says six o'clock.

Through the stained glass in the front door, Ruth sees a strange blueish light. When she opens the door, she realises what it is. The world has changed. The long drive is covered with a heavy layer of snow, the trees are white with it, and Ruth's car is barely visible. The surface is virgin and unspoiled, until one of Hastings' dogs breaks free and starts running round in mad circles, barking hysterically.

'Jesus,' says Nelson. 'That's come down fast.'

'Oh my God.' Ruth feels sick. 'How am I going to get home?'

'We'll go in my car,' says Nelson. 'It's bigger and heavier. And it's got a wider wheelbase.'

Words like 'wider wheelbase' mean nothing to Ruth, but she takes in the fact that Nelson is offering to drive her home. Back to Kate. With only the briefest of farewells to Jack Hastings, they run across the white lawn to Nelson's Mercedes. The snow seeps into Ruth's trainers and, within seconds, she is freezing. Nelson sweeps the snow off the windscreen and gets in to start the engine. Thank God for German cars. Maybe the ill-fated captain was right and they did win the war.

Ruth leans forward in her seat, willing the car to negotiate the

snowy drive. The wheels spin and Nelson swears but they move forward slowly, the soft snow hissing under the wheels.

‘Should have chains on really,’ says Nelson. ‘But at least it’s not icy yet.’

When they reach the road Ruth starts to breathe more easily, but as they near the main road they see that something is wrong. There are flashing lights, a man in a reflective jacket barring the way.

‘Police,’ says Nelson. He gets out of the car. After a brief discussion in which Ruth can see the reflective jacket shrugging obsequiously, Nelson comes back to the window.

‘Road’s blocked,’ he says. ‘Lorry’s jack-knifed.’

‘Oh no.’ Ruth is rigid with horror. ‘What shall we do?’

‘There’s no route cross-country,’ he says. ‘We’ll have to go back to Sea’s End House.’

‘What about Kate?’ Ruth’s voice wobbles.

‘She’ll be fine, love. Clara’s with her. And I’ll get you home if I can. I’ll phone for reinforcements. Get a chopper if necessary. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ Ruth manages a watery smile.

Jack and Stella are all concern. They usher Ruth into the kitchen while Nelson makes his phone calls. Irene, of course, makes them tea with bone china cups and saucers. At Stella’s suggestion, Ruth rings Clara. The girl’s cheerful voice is a distinct comfort.

‘What a pain. That road is a nightmare. But don’t worry, Ruth. I can kip down on your sofa. I’ve made up Kate’s milk and she looks a bit sleepy.’

‘Is Tatjana back yet?’

‘No. But it’s pretty wild outside, maybe she’s stuck in town.’

‘Maybe. I’ll get home as soon as I can.’

‘Okay. But don’t worry. Really.’

Ruth clicks off the phone feeling better but still hyperventilating slightly. It’s as if there’s still an umbilical cord attaching her to Kate. She can go away from her baby for short stretches of time, but after a few hours she starts to panic. It’s bad enough at the end of a working day, racing through the King’s Lynn streets, desperate to press her face against Kate’s and inhale her lovely baby smell. But now, stuck miles away from her, Ruth feels as if she will snap clean in two, so strong is the invisible pull

of her daughter.

Nelson returns. 'Snow's started again. We can't get the chopper out in conditions like this.' Ruth thought he'd been joking about the helicopter. 'We'll have to sit it out for a bit, love.'

Love. It's the second time he's called her that.

'You must be our guests,' says Stella Hastings. 'We'll have a nice supper and I'll make up the spare room for you, Inspector. Ruth, you won't mind having Clara's room?'

'No,' says Ruth. 'But the snow might stop soon.'

Hastings comes back into the room with snow on his peaked cap. 'Not much chance of that, I'm afraid. It's pretty heavy now. I walked up to the coast road and the lorry's stuck fast. I knew something like this would happen one day. I've warned the council time and time again.'

*

It's a strange, surreal evening. Despite further assurances from Clara (Kate is sleeping, she's fine, they're both fine), Ruth still feels tense and twitchy. She also can't forget the events of the day – the boat trip, the discovery of the buried box and, finally, the film itself. All through dinner – polished dining table, flickering candles, acres of silver and china – she keeps seeing Hugh Anselm's face, hearing his voice, the voice of a precocious teenager. *The story I have to tell is an unedifying one ... there was a difference of opinion ... to my everlasting shame, I acquiesced.* But his story was not a teenager's story. This was a man who had to face a terrible choice and bear an intolerable burden of guilt – all before he was twenty. What had the rest of Hugh Anselm's life been like, she wonders? Why did he decide, in the end, to break the oath? Why had he written to Dieter Eckhart? Dieter, who is now dead.

Yet Jack Hastings, who has just heard that his father murdered five men in cold blood, seems unaffected. Earlier, in the study, he had looked a broken man. Now he is every inch the genial host, pouring wine, telling amusing anecdotes about his family. His mother, Irene, smiles vaguely in the shadows. What does she know? What does she suspect?

Yet despite all these cross-currents of emotion, there is something almost magical about the evening. The formal dining

room, the candlelight, the knowledge that outside it is still snowing, all conspire to make the little group around the table seem somehow removed from the rest of the world. It's as if, thinks Ruth, they have travelled in time. When they finally get up from the table and open the doors to the white expanse outside, will it be 2009 or 1940? Or will it be 1840, with carriage wheels whirling through the snow? Will the warning light shine in the tower, three short flashes, two long? Will Buster Hastings be walking down the cliff path towards the sea, gun in hand?

And, if she's honest, she likes the fact that she is there with Nelson. The configuration around the table, Jack and Stella, Ruth and Nelson, makes it almost seem as if they are a couple. She has never been out to dinner with Nelson and it is unlikely that she ever will again. So she enjoys looking at him across the table, she likes the fact that she and Nelson have some shared history to relate (they tell the story of the Iron Age body on the Saltmarsh, the discovery that first drew them together), she relishes the moment when, after repairing to the drawing room, they sit together on the sofa drinking brandy.

Irene has gone to bed. 'She sleeps downstairs; it's easier for her these days.' Stella, after checking on her mother-in-law, comes into the room with coffee in little gold cups, chocolates, coloured sugar.

'Blimey,' says Ruth, who has had rather a lot to drink, 'do you eat like this every night?'

She sees Nelson smiling into his brandy.

'We try to eat in the dining room at least once a week,' says Hastings. 'It's a shame to let standards drop entirely.'

'But most of the time we huddle round the kitchen table,' says Stella. 'Jack reads the paper and I listen to the radio. That's why it's nice to have guests.'

'Do you entertain a lot?' asks Nelson. He says 'entertain' like it's a foreign word.

'Not really.' There's a twinkle in Stella's eye as she passes round the cups. 'Jack's fallen out with most of the neighbours, you see.'

'Really, Stella! That's not true.'

'I can't stand most of my neighbours,' says Nelson. 'But the wife still insists on asking them round.'

It's the first time he has mentioned Michelle. At least he didn't say her name, thinks Ruth.

‘You should be master in your own home, my dear fellow,’ says Hastings.

‘That’s easier said than done,’ says Nelson. ‘I’m outnumbered. I’ve got two daughters, you see.’ He looks at Ruth and away again. ‘They gang up on me.’

‘Clara could always twist Jack round her little finger,’ says Stella. ‘You’ve got all this to come, Ruth.’

Ruth smiles stiffly.

‘I don’t mind being outnumbered,’ says Nelson. ‘I haven’t been first in the bathroom for over fifteen years. It’s hard, though, when they grow up.’

Stella nods, her blue eyes warm. ‘You’re so right, Harry. I remember when Alastair left home I was bereft. I kept wandering into his room and crying. It was the same with Giles and Clara. That’s why I’m glad that Clara’s come back to us for a bit.’

‘She’ll soon be off again,’ says Hastings. ‘She’s thinking seriously about the TEFL course.’

‘You must be proud of her,’ says Ruth. She thinks it’s about time she said something.

‘Oh we are,’ says Stella. ‘She hasn’t had it easy. School was difficult. I was so pleased that she made it to university and got a good degree. I just hope that this latest thing ...’ Her voice trails off. The logs hiss in the fire. In the hall, a clock strikes.

‘Midnight,’ says Nelson. ‘I must be for my bed.’

‘Me too,’ says Ruth and blushes. Nelson grins at her.

‘Don’t mind us, ha ha,’ Jack Hastings is quick to enlarge on the joke.

‘Really, Jack,’ says Stella mildly. ‘I’ll show you to your room, Ruth. It’s in the tower. Yours is the one above, Harry. It’s got its own bathroom so you can make up for all those years of missing out.’

*

Clara’s room is comfortable and untidy. Because it’s in the tower it has curved walls and nothing quite fits. The bed juts out into the middle of the room, cupboards and bookcases stand awkwardly against the rounded walls. It was obviously once Clara’s childhood bedroom – there is a rocking horse grinning in the corner and a pile of teddy bears on the widow seat. Equally

obviously, it has been recently decorated, with blameless sprigged wallpaper and curtains held back with little bows. Ruth goes to the window and looks out. Far below is the sea. It looks wrong to see snow on the beach, like a negative, the black waves breaking on the white shore. Far off, she can see a flashing light. It's probably on the coast road but it makes her think of the lighthouse and the days when its beam would have shone out, warning sailors off the jagged rocks. At the foot of the tower there is a narrow line of snow before the land drops away. The garden and the summer house have disappeared forever. Ruth thinks of the night when the Germans landed, the shots in the dark, the little boy watching from the window. Perhaps this same window? She shivers.

She washes in the bathroom, a thin slice taken out of the room. Stella has lent her a nightdress but it's floor-length and frilly and she doesn't want to wear it. ('Why?' she asks herself sternly. 'Who will see it?') Instead, she keeps on her T-shirt and knickers. She is appalled to find herself stealing some of Clara's perfume. She doesn't know what she is thinking of. She and Nelson said a very brief goodnight in the hall. She won't see him again until morning. She puts her phone on the bedside table, wishing she could ring home again. But Clara will be asleep. Funny to think of her sleeping in Ruth's bed and Ruth in hers (though Clara insisted that she would be comfortable on the sofa). When she last spoke to Clara, Tatjana wasn't home. She has obviously decided to stay the night in Norwich.

Ruth sighs. She feels twitchier than ever, every nerve strung up to snapping point. How is she ever going to get to sleep? She fetches a glass of water from the bathroom. Perhaps she's just a bit drunk. But slow sipping doesn't help. She goes to the bookcase. She'll read until she drops off. Clara is nothing if not eclectic in her tastes: law textbooks, Dickens, Jilly Cooper, Agatha Christie. Ruth thinks of Archie and his crime novels. What made him think of that elaborate code? And why leave it to Maria, whose English, according to Nelson, isn't that good? Perhaps that was a way to ensure that the film would never be found – a way of honouring his promise to Hugh but protecting the memory of the troop. And who, she wonders suddenly, was the third person who knew the secret? The person Hugh mentioned in the film. Presumably he too is dead by now.

Ruth takes out a copy of *Riders* ; she loves books about horses. But as she does so she dislodges a small, leather-bound book that has been lying on top of Jilly Cooper's epic. It is a diary.

She knows she shouldn't open it. She knows that. She has no right to read Clara's private diary. It would be the worst possible invasion of privacy. She should just put it back on the shelf.

Ruth opens the diary.

I hate his wife, she reads. *I want to kill him for deceiving me.*

Ruth stops reading. Clutching the book, she goes to the window. The snow has stopped. Sea's End House lies under a cloak of silence; everything is muffled, enclosed, secret. The roads will be treacherous. Ruth is miles away from home. Clara is looking after her baby. She hears Clara's voice, on the night of the naming day party. *I was expelled from two schools.*

Why was she expelled?

She hears Stella. *She hasn't had it easy. School was difficult.*

Why was school difficult?

On an impulse, Ruth goes to the bedside table and starts looking through the drawers. In the third drawer, she finds what she is looking for.

A pair of dress-making scissors.

CHAPTER 23

‘Nelson!’

The hall is dark. A winding staircase leads up to Nelson’s room but the door is shut. Ruth starts up the stairs, but before she has reached the top the door opens.

‘Ruth! What is it?’

Nelson descends the stairs. He is wearing a T-shirt and boxer shorts. Even in the state she is in, Ruth notices.

‘Nelson!’ She grabs his arm. ‘I’ve got to talk to you.’

She turns and screams. A little figure is standing in front of her, wearing a long white robe.

‘Ruth, for God’s sake.’ This is Nelson.

Ruth takes a deep breath and realises that the sinister figure is Irene and the robe is a candlewick dressing gown. She clasps the old lady’s arm.

‘Irene! Why was Clara expelled from school?’

Behind her, Nelson expostulates but Irene does not seem put out by the question. She blinks calmly once or twice.

‘Such a silly fuss. I’m sure it was as much the other girl’s fault as Clara’s.’

‘But what did she do?’

‘They said she ... hurt someone.’

‘Hurt? How?’

‘Stabbed them. With some scissors.’

Ruth lets out a low moan and drags Nelson into her room. Unperturbed, Irene patters back downstairs.

‘What’s all this about?’ protests Nelson.

‘Didn’t you hear? Clara stabbed someone when she was at school. She was expelled.’

‘That was years ago.’

‘And I found these in her bedside cabinet.’

Nelson takes the scissors and turns them over in his hand.

‘Nelson!’ Ruth almost screams. ‘She’s looking after our baby.’

Nelson looks at Ruth, dawning horror in his eyes. ‘We’ve got to get to her,’ he says.

‘We can’t. The coast road is blocked.’

‘I’ll get one of my team. I need my phone.’

He runs back upstairs. Ruth thinks she should get dressed but Nelson is back before she has had time to move.

‘I’ll call Judy. She lives near you.’

‘But how will she get there?’ wails Ruth.

‘She’s got a four-by-four. We tease her about it.’

There is an agonising wait before Judy answers the phone.

Ruth hears Nelson’s voice, barking orders as he paces round the room.

‘... Ruth’s place ... yes ... quick as you can, force entry if necessary ... you can phone for back-up but I’m not sure a squad car’ll get through ... yes ... call me.’

‘Does she think she can make it?’ asks Ruth. She holds onto her arms to stop herself shaking.

‘Yes. The roads are bad but she’s got a pretty tough vehicle. She thinks it’ll take about an hour.’

‘An hour!’

‘Snow’s very deep in places.’

‘Oh, Nelson.’ Ruth collapses onto the bed. ‘Do you think she’ll be okay? Kate?’

Nelson sits next to her. ‘I’m sure she will.’ But his voice sounds shaky.

‘What will I do if anything happens to her?’

‘Nothing will happen to her. She’ll be okay.’

Ruth starts to cry and, after a moment, Nelson takes her in his arms.

*

Judy almost misses the turning to New Road. The snow makes everything look strange and unfamiliar. She finds herself leaning forward, like an old lady in a Morris Minor. Her headlights make dingy yellow circles in the darkness; twice she’s had to check that they’re actually working. The snow has stopped but the roads are icing over. As she takes the corner, she feels the ground sliding away from her. If she’s killed, it’ll be Nelson’s fault.

But the car’s solid tractor-like wheels hold up well. Judy feels a surge of satisfaction. They’d all laughed at her for buying this car. ‘Go off-road much, do you?’ Clough had scoffed. Clough has been even more obnoxious than usual recently, calling her ‘Bridezilla’ and implying that the wedding plans are taking her mind off the

job. Bastard. She wishes she hadn't invited him now. Besides, he's totally wrong. She is throwing herself into work to take her mind off the nightmare of dressing in white and saying 'I do' in front of hundreds of gawping spectators. Why didn't she insist on a registry office? Or the Caribbean. The Caribbean would be good.

Anyway, tonight she's one up on Clough. The boss called her, not him. It's because of the car, she knows, but that just shows she was right to buy a four-by-four. Sucks to Clough and his flashy Saab. The boss asked her for help and he'll be eternally grateful for ... what exactly? Up to this point, the idea of being the heroine of the hour has taken her mind off the fact that she has no idea what this crisis is all about. Why is it so urgent that she has to drive to Ruth's house across icy roads, forcing entry if necessary? Is Ruth's baby in danger? But there's someone babysitting isn't there? 'A girl called Clara,' Nelson had said tersely. 'If she gives you any trouble, arrest her.' 'What?' 'Just do it, Judy, please.'

Please. He'd actually said please. And he'd called her Judy. Usually it's 'Johnson' or 'you'. A suspicion, which has been fluttering around in Judy's brain since the naming day ceremony, now flaps its wings once again. Why is Nelson so concerned about Ruth's baby? Clough told her about the incident at Broughton. The boss falling asleep with the baby in his arms. What if ... no, it's impossible.

New Road is a nightmare. One slip, Judy knows, and she'll plunge the car down the bank and will probably never be seen again. She grips the steering wheel. She's a good driver (much to her satisfaction she beat Clough on the police advanced driving course) but this is something else. She crawls forward, listening to the snow crunching beneath her wheels. One lapse of concentration, that's all it will take.

When she sees it, she thinks at first that she is hallucinating. A dark hooded figure, trudging along at the side of the road. Who on earth would be walking along New Road through foot-high snow? Then she starts to panic. Her head spins with images of mysterious figures that appear beside unwary travellers, of car-crash victims who suddenly materialise on your back seat, grinning through their mangled faces, the third man – the hooded man – Christ on the road to Emmaus. She hears her breath, loud and uneven, filling the car. She checks her driving mirror. Pull

yourself together, she tells herself. But the ragged breathing continues.

She is almost level now. What if the vision vanishes into the snow? What if it turns, brandishing an axe?

The figure turns, pulling the hood away from its face. It is Cathbad.

*

‘I love her so much. I never thought I would love a baby this much.’

‘I know.’ Nelson strokes her hair.

‘What if something happens to her?’

‘It won’t.’

‘How do you know?’

Nelson says nothing. She can feel his heart beating through the thin T-shirt. She shivers.

‘You’re freezing. Get into bed.’

‘Don’t leave me,’ says Ruth.

‘I won’t.’

*

‘Cathbad!’ Judy winds down the window, with difficulty because it is covered with snow. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Don’t switch off the engine,’ says Cathbad. With a deft movement he opens the door and jumps nimbly into the high vehicle.

‘Are you going to Ruth’s?’ asks Judy, closing the window and edging forward once more.

‘Where else?’ Cathbad is shivering even though, under his cloak, he is sensibly dressed in a parka and combat trousers.

‘She’s not there.’

‘I know.’

‘Then why?’

Cathbad calmly adjusts the seat so he can stretch his legs. ‘I don’t know. I just had this feeling. I rang earlier and I got a bad feeling about the girl who answered the phone.’

‘A bad feeling? Jesus, Cathbad.’

‘Why are *you* here?’

‘Nelson had a bad feeling about her too.’

‘Ah.’ Cathbad sounds satisfied. ‘So Nelson’s starting to trust his instincts. That’s good.’

‘Is it?’

‘For him, anyway. Careful.’ The car begins to slide.

‘It’s icy here.’

‘The temperature’s dropping.’

No second sight needed there. Judy’s dashboard says minus five degrees. The windscreen wipers scrape against ice. Judy can see only a few yards in front of her face.

‘You were mad to try to walk it,’ she says.

‘There’s a pleasure sure in being mad,’ says Cathbad, ‘that none but madmen know.’

It’s a typical Cathbad answer. Judy decides to ignore it, she needs all her concentration for driving. Cathbad seems perfectly relaxed, humming under his breath. Last year, he was involved in a car chase with the boss. If he can survive that, nothing will faze him. Despite everything, though, Judy is glad to have company. The Saltmarsh, featureless in the dark, is a spooky place. The presence of another human, even one prone to irritatingly gnomish utterances, is indescribably comforting.

Ruth’s cottage seems to come from nowhere. One minute they are crawling along through the unchanging white nothingness, the next, the blue gate is beside them and they can see the three houses, their roofs rounded with snow. The security light comes on as they park outside. Everything else is in complete darkness. It is two a.m.

‘The houses either side are empty,’ says Cathbad.

‘I know.’ Judy switches off the engine. ‘I wouldn’t live here in a million years.’

Outside it is so cold that Judy feels her heart clench with shock. Cathbad, though, seems fully recovered. He jumps down and makes for the front door. The wind is stronger here and the snow has formed fantastically shaped drifts, almost as high as the windows.

‘Shall I knock? The bell’s not working.’

‘Cathbad?’ Judy hates herself for this but she’s scared.

Suddenly too scared to move another step. ‘What if—’ She stops.

Cathbad takes her hands. Despite the cold, his hands are very warm. ‘Judy,’ he says. ‘You are strong. You are a wonderful, strong human being.’

And the weird thing is, she does feel strong. Strong enough to wrench herself free from Cathbad and hammer on the door.

‘Open up!’

The sound echoes inside the house. Then silence. Judy and Cathbad look at each other.

‘We’ll have to force the door,’ says Judy. ‘I’ve got a crowbar in the jeep.’

Cathbad holds up his hand. ‘Shh.’

Very slowly, the door opens. The chain is still on and a small voice calls, ‘Who is it?’

‘Police.’ With shaking hands, Judy pushes her warrant card through the gap in the door.

There is a rattle as the chain comes off and they see a blonde girl, very young and scared, a blanket wrapped round her shoulders.

‘I’m Sergeant Judy Johnson. DCI Nelson sent me.’

‘I know you, don’t I?’ says Clara. ‘You were at the party the other night.’

‘Where’s the baby?’

‘Upstairs.’

Judy bounds up the narrow stairs. She isn’t scared now, adrenaline rushes through her. Whatever she is about to see – and during the drive she has imagined every horror possible – she can cope with it. She flings open the door to Ruth’s bedroom and can just make out the cot by the bed. She switches on the overhead light and strides across the room. Kate is lying on her side, a pink blanket pulled up to her chin. She is breathing steadily. Judy takes off her glove and touches the baby’s cheek. It is warm. Kate whimpers.

‘What’s going on?’ Clara is standing behind her. She still sounds scared.

‘You didn’t answer your phone. DCI Nelson was worried.’ Judy is already punching in his number.

‘I was asleep.’

‘Boss? ... Yes, she’s fine, I’m looking at her now ... of course I’m sure ... yes, I’ll tell her ... okay.’

Clara is looking at her, almost in awe. ‘How did you get here?’

‘I’ve got a four-by-four.’

‘Why is that druid with you?’

‘I’ll explain in a minute. Any chance of some tea?’

But when they get downstairs the druid has already made tea. The sofa is covered with bedclothes so they sit at the table by the window. There is an odd intimacy between the three of them, sitting at Ruth's table, in Ruth's house, drinking Ruth's tea. Looking after Ruth's baby. Clara cradles her mug in both hands, staring dreamily into space. Cathbad puts two sugars in Judy's cup, which is odd because he hasn't asked whether she takes sugar. She does.

'Did you tell Nelson?' he says.

'Yes.'

'Did he say thank you?'

'No.'

'Was Ruth with him?'

Judy catches Cathbad's eye. 'Yes.'

'The boss wants me to stay the night,' Judy says to Clara. 'Is that okay with you?'

Clara shrugs. 'Suit yourself. There are two beds upstairs. A single and a double.' She looks curiously from Judy to Cathbad.

'I'll take the double,' says Judy.

*

Ruth is leaning forward, her head between her knees. Nelson's voice seems to come from a long way off.

'Are you feeling any better?'

'Yes.' With an effort, Ruth straightens up. 'It's just the relief. Knowing that she's safe.'

'I know.' Nelson runs his hand through his hair until it stands up like a crest. He's quite grey now, Ruth notices. His chin is dark with stubble. It must be nearly morning, she thinks.

'What did Judy say again?'

'She'd seen Kate. She was sleeping peacefully.'

'And Clara?'

'She'd been asleep on the sofa.'

'Do you think she might have killed Dieter Eckhart?'

'It's possible.' Nelson rubs his face. 'Stabbing is usually a crime of passion. You say she'd written in her diary that she wanted to kill him?'

'Yes. I didn't read any more.' Ruth points at the little book on the bedside table.

‘I’ll take that with me tomorrow. The scissors too, though they’ll have our prints all over them.’

Ruth shudders. ‘I still don’t like to think of her in the house with Kate.’

‘I told Judy that she or Cathbad had to sleep in the room with her.’

‘What on earth was Cathbad doing there?’

Nelson shrugs. ‘You know Cathbad. He always turns up when you least expect him.’

They both think of other occasions when Cathbad has turned up, just in time to save or be saved. Cathbad is magic, Erik used to say. He certainly seems able to materialise at will.

‘I should go back to my room,’ says Nelson. He picks up Ruth’s watch from the bedside table. Half past two.

‘Yes,’ she says. But neither of them moves.

Ruth thinks that Nelson says something under his breath, but she doesn’t hear. She shuts her eyes, moving towards Nelson as his lips close upon hers.

CHAPTER 24

In the end, Judy opts for the single bed. She just doesn't like the idea of sharing a room with a baby. What if Kate wakes up crying? That, to Judy, is more terrifying than the hooded figure on the road.

'It's all right,' says Cathbad. 'I'll sleep in there.'

'I'm sorry,' says Judy. 'I'm just not very maternal.'

Cathbad looks at her. 'I wouldn't say that.'

'Do you have children?' asks Judy.

'A daughter.' Cathbad's voice drops. 'I didn't see much of her when she was growing up. I'm trying to make up for it now.'

They are standing, whispering, on the landing. This, like the snow and the tea earlier, makes them seem ridiculously intimate, as if they're flatmates or having what Judy's nieces would call a 'sleepover'.

'I'm not sure I want children,' she says. 'It's such a responsibility.'

'What does your fiancé think?'

Judy hesitates. How does Cathbad know she's getting married? Has he noticed her engagement ring? There's something nasty about the way he says 'fiancé'.

'We've never discussed it,' she says, with dignity.

Cathbad grins. 'I'd start discussing it, if I were you.' And he disappears into Ruth's room.

Judy washes in the bathroom, noticing that Ruth uses surprisingly expensive soap. What is it about Cathbad that always makes her feel slightly uneasy? She first met him over a year ago. Nelson had needed to get across the Saltmarsh at night, in a storm, and Cathbad had been the only person to know the mysterious hidden pathway. Judy had been impressed with him then. She did not, like the rest of the team, see him as a nutcase, one of the weirdos that often hang around police stations offering unsolicited help and advice. There is a stillness about Cathbad that attracts Judy. He is contained within himself; he doesn't see the need to seek approval from anyone else. Darren is like a big golden retriever, rushing round and licking everyone. Like me, love me, pat me. And, yes, he wants ten children.

The next time Judy met Cathbad had been at a summer solstice party at the Roman dig at Swaffham. It had been a fairly wild night, she remembers. She had danced with Cathbad but then she had danced with Dave and Irish Ted too. She has an image of Cathbad lighting a fire, high up on a hill. The flames in the darkness, the druids chanting, the scent of burning herbs. Ruth had been there with her archaeologist friend, Max. What had happened to him?

It was only at the naming day party that she had really spoken to Cathbad. They had talked about Catholicism and paganism and the role of godparents. Judy tries to remember whether she told him that she was getting married. She does remember that she'd found him quite attractive at the naming day, which she hadn't before. What was different?

The spare room is tiny, just a single bed, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe. The rest of the space is taken up with cardboard boxes, stacked one on top of each other. It's not exactly cosy. The top of the chest is crowded with creams and make-up. Jesus, no wonder Tatjana looks so good. There is also a book written in some incomprehensible language and a picture of a beautiful, dark-eyed child. Judy picks up this last and examines it. She spent a long time chatting to Tatjana after her hen party and she never mentioned that she had a child. She turns the photo over. On the back, in a flowing hand, is written 'Jacob 1995'.

Judy gets into the narrow bed and determinedly turns out the light. She'd better get some sleep or she'll be useless tomorrow. The roads will still be bad after all that snow so getting home will be no joke. She supposes that she'll have to stay here until Ruth or Nelson gets back. She sits up.

'Cathbad?'

He appears in the doorway, still wearing combats and a black T-shirt.

'Cathbad, do you think Nelson is Kate's father?'

Cathbad sits heavily on the foot of the bed. 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes, I do.'

'Jesus.' Judy considers this. It feels wrong, sitting here in the dark with Cathbad. It feels wrong because it feels right.

'Does anyone else know?'

Cathbad shakes his head. 'I don't think so. They're both very private people.'

‘But the boss is married.’

‘I’m sure he loves his wife.’

‘But what about Ruth?’

Cathbad sighs. ‘She loves him, I think. But him? He loves the baby, the idea of being a father again. But I don’t think he’ll ever leave Michelle.’

‘Cathbad?’

‘What?’

‘Are you really a wizard?’

Cathbad grins, his teeth very white in the darkness.

‘What do you think?’

‘I don’t know what I think.’

‘I’m not a wizard,’ says Cathbad. ‘I’m just someone who tries to live a certain way. In harmony with nature, in harmony with the old traditions. My mother though ...’ He laughs softly. ‘A few hundred years ago she would have been burnt at the stake. She knew a spell to make your hens lay, to charm back an unfaithful husband, to make a man irresistible to women. She was a witch, all right, even though she went to mass every Sunday. This was rural Ireland. Everyone went to mass even if they were queuing up in Mammy’s back yard the next day.’

Judy tries to imagine Cathbad as a child. He seems ageless somehow. ‘My dad’s Irish,’ she says. ‘He’s a bookie.’

‘That accounts for the bond between us.’

‘Is there a bond between us?’

‘I think so, don’t you?’

Judy moves her legs, trying not to touch Cathbad. The trouble is, the room’s too small. It’s getting smaller by the second.

‘Do you want to go to sleep?’ asks Cathbad.

It’s as if he’s asking a different question altogether. Judy struggles with her answer.

‘Yes,’ she says at last.

*

Much later, Judy wakes from a confused dream about ice floes, hooded figures, sacred fires. Groping on the floor, she finds her watch. Five o’clock in the morning.

The landing is silent. No sound from Clara downstairs. Suddenly a soft footfall makes her jump and something rubs

against her legs. She stifles a scream and, looking down, meets luminous green eyes. Jesus, she'd forgotten Ruth had a cat. Shakily she strokes Flint's gently butting head. Where has he been hiding all this time?

In the bedroom, Kate is still sleeping, making little snuffling noises. Cathbad is lying across the double bed. Asleep he looks much younger.

'Cathbad?'

He is awake in an instant.

'You've shaved off your beard.'

Cathbad reaches for her, pulling her down on the bed next to him. He is strong, much stronger than he looks. He smells of wood smoke and expensive soap.

'We can't,' says Judy. 'I'm getting married in two weeks.'

'It was meant to be,' says Cathbad, kissing her neck.

I don't believe in any of that, Judy wants to say. I'm a rationalist, a policewoman and I've only ever slept with one man. But, instead, she is kissing him back, greedily, urgently, moving her body against his.

CHAPTER 25

It is nearly nine o'clock when Ruth wakes up. The curtains are open and the room is full of light. There's no sign of Nelson. She goes to the window, wearing the duvet over her shoulders. Outside the sky is bright blue and the snow blindingly white. There are no footsteps on the path down to the beach, where the sea is breaking gently against the frosted pebbles. Still draped in the duvet, Ruth pads into the bathroom. From the bathroom window, which faces the side of the house, she sees Nelson, in his shirtsleeves, clearing the snow from around his car. She watches him dreamily, not thinking of anything very much. He is working hard, his breath billowing around him, but he's doing it all wrong, bending his back rather than his knees. Ruth noticed this once before. When was it?

How could she have gone to bed with him again? After trying so hard to keep her distance, to be independent, not to jeopardise his marriage. Perhaps she's pregnant. Maybe they'll continue to have sex once a year and, in a few years' time, they'll have a family of five. Don't be silly, she tells herself. It's highly unlikely that she's pregnant again and last night was a one off. *Another* one off. It was the snow, the house, the relief of discovering that Kate was all right. A combination of circumstances that will never occur again. Ruth is free to get on with her life. She leans against the window, her breath misting the glass.

As she watches, another figure comes out of the house. Jack Hastings. He is warmly dressed in a heavy coat and peaked cap with the inevitable dogs running around him. He says something to Nelson and Nelson laughs, the sound echoing up to Ruth's turret window. She retreats. She doesn't want them seeing her there, like some overweight Lady of Shalott. Time to get on with things.

She rings Judy. There's a long wait before she answers and Judy sounds distinctly odd, flustered, unlike herself. Is Kate all right, Ruth asks anxiously. Yes fine, says Judy, Cathbad's giving her some breakfast now. Is Cathbad still there then? Yes, the snow's still pretty bad on the Saltmarsh. What's Clara doing? She's making some tea. Please stay with Kate until I get there,

says Ruth. I'll be as quick as I can.

She showers standing up in the bath, washing her hair with some violently scented gel. It's horrible, putting on the same clothes from last night. What was it that Nelson had said to her? 'I can't get you out of my head, Ruth. I try but you're there all the time.' She doesn't know how she feels about Nelson; it's all so complicated, so angst-ridden. But she knows one thing: when he said those words, a shock of pure pleasure had run through her. Nelson doesn't love her, she knows that, but at least he can't forget her. That's something.

Breakfast is awkward. Nelson doesn't meet her eye. Stella cooks them bacon and eggs, maintaining a steady flow of hostess chatter. Jack is silent, feeding bacon rinds to the dogs. Irene doesn't put in an appearance. 'Mother had a bad night,' explains Stella.

'Jack's found me some chains for the car,' says Nelson, still not looking at Ruth. 'The coast road is clear. We should be able to get through.'

'What about my car?'

'Better leave it here. I'll have someone pick it up for you. The important thing is to get you home.'

'Yes,' agrees Ruth.

'We ought to start as soon as possible.'

'Have some coffee first,' says Stella, taking the pot from the Aga.

And Ruth feels a curious reluctance to leave. She wants to see Kate, of course she does, but she also wants to stay here, having someone cook for her and make her coffee. She wants to sit by the fire and read the paper. She wants to huddle up on the sofa and look at the snow outside. She wants to be Stella's daughter. She wants to stay here with Nelson.

But as soon as Nelson has drunk his coffee he is standing up. 'Thank you for your hospitality,' he says formally.

'My dear fellow, don't mention it,' says Jack.

Now that Nelson has become 'my dear fellow', thinks Ruth, will it be difficult for him to raise the little fact of Jack's father being a murderer? She knows that Nelson has the film in his car, along with the diary and the scissors. His next visit to Sea's End House may turn out to be a very different affair. But Hastings, who yesterday had seemed so shaken by Hugh Anselm's film, is all

charm and smiles. He shakes Ruth's hand warmly, brushing off her thanks. 'Any time, my dear. Glad we could help.'

Ruth turns to Stella. 'You've been so kind.'

Stella enfolds her in a hug. 'Come again. Bring your little girl.'
'I will.'

'Come on, Ruth,' says Nelson, impatient as ever. 'We'd better get going.'

*

The drive to the Saltmarsh is beautiful. The fields are white, glittering in the sun, the trees like a Christmas card. Everything ugly or utilitarian – the municipal dump, the holiday flats, the caravan selling hamburgers – has been covered with this kindly layer of magic. It's hard to believe that last night the snow had seemed terrifying, a malign force. Now it's sleigh rides and Santa and Holiday on Ice. They pass some teenagers sledging down a hill on bin liners, children building a snowman in their front garden, a family on their way to church, ears aglow with virtue. Ruth had forgotten that it was Sunday. They do see a few abandoned cars, an upturned bicycle, its wheels still spinning, but otherwise the snow seems delightful, designed purely for fun. The main roads have been gritted and, as they get nearer to King's Lynn, they see cars and buses. The world is getting back to normal.

'Thaw's setting in,' says Nelson. It seems like the first thing he's said for hours.

'It's incredible,' says Ruth. 'All this snow in April.' Her mouth feels dry; she doesn't think she's ever uttered a more boring sentence.

They drive in silence across the Saltmarsh. The bleak landscape of stunted trees and wind-blown grass has been transformed and a smooth white terrain unfolds in front of them, like the surface of the moon. The birds are flying lower than usual, desperate for food; occasionally a sandpiper makes a kamikaze dive down into the reed beds and the ducks walk, bemused, on iced-over marsh pools.

'Ruth—' says Nelson.

'I can't wait to see Kate,' gabbles Ruth. 'It feels like years since I've seen her. It was so kind of Judy to drive all this way ...' Her

voice fades away.

‘Ruth.’ Nelson is stopping the car. Keep driving, Ruth urges him silently. I don’t want to have this conversation now. Ever.

‘We’ve got to talk.’

‘What about?’ says Ruth.

‘Jesus! What about? About everything.’

‘There’s nothing to say.’ Ruth fiddles with her seatbelt.

Suddenly the car feels far too small. She knows that Nelson is looking at her but, for many reasons, she does not want to meet his eyes.

‘Look, Ruth ...’ Ruth hears Nelson’s voice gearing down to his persuasive tone. ‘Last night was ... well, it shouldn’t have happened.’

‘I know,’ says Ruth, looking out of the window. In the far distance, she can see the sea.

‘I mean it was ... great, but—’

‘What do you mean “great”?’

‘You know what I mean. If I was single, it would be a different matter. But I’m not. We both know that.’

Would it be different? Ruth doubts it somehow. A single Nelson would never have looked twice at her; he would be off searching for a blonde Michelle clone. It was only circumstance, proximity and a host of other words meaning the same thing; meaning that she and Nelson were never really meant to be together.

‘I know you’re married,’ says Ruth, trying to keep her voice calm. ‘I’ve always respected that. I’ve never made any demands on you, even with Kate. Have I?’

‘No.’

‘Well, then. It’ll never happen again. I’ll make sure of it.’

Nelson sighs. Ruth doesn’t know if it is with relief or regret. They both sit in silence for a moment, looking out across the endless white marshes. Then Nelson starts the engine.

Judy’s jeep is parked outside the house, next to Clara’s snow-covered Mini. Ruth leaps out of the car as soon as it stops. She doesn’t look back to see if Nelson is following.

She opens the door to a bizarre domestic scene. Clara is sitting at the table, earphones in, reading. Judy is in the kitchen and Cathbad is lying on the floor playing with Kate.

Ruth rushes over and grabs Kate, holding her so tightly that she squawks. ‘Hallo, sweetheart,’ she whispers.

'Hallo,' answers Cathbad, still lying on the rug.

'Cathbad! How come you're here?'

'Ask Judy.'

Still carrying Kate, Ruth hurries over to Judy and hugs her awkwardly, the baby between them.

'Thank you so much for coming over.'

'It's okay. All part of the service. I was just making toast. I hope you don't mind.'

'Of course not. Have anything.'

'Well, there wasn't really anything else. Just cat food and baby food.'

'Where's Flint?'

'Asleep on your bed. He gave me the fright of my life last night.'

Nelson has come in and is talking in a low voice to Cathbad. Ruth walks over to Clara who is watching her rather quizzically.

'Thanks so much for staying last night, Clara.'

Clara takes out her headphones. 'That's okay. You didn't really need to send the cavalry over. I was quite capable of looking after Kate for one night, you know.'

Ruth smiles, slightly embarrassed. In the light of the day, her fears seem rather stupid. But then she remembers the diary. *I hate his wife. I want to kill him.* No, she's still glad that Judy was here last night. And Cathbad too. But why is he here?

Before she can ask him, Nelson cuts in. With his height, dark clothes and unsmiling face, he is incongruous in the small, cosy room. He seems determined to add to this impression, speaking in a brisk, businesslike tone, not making eye-contact with anyone.

'I'll drive you home, Clara,' he says. 'You still wouldn't want to risk the roads round here.'

'You can give me a lift too,' says Cathbad, who has taken a piece of toast from Judy.

'No,' answers Nelson brusquely. 'You go with Johnson.'

I'm Johnson again, am I, thinks Judy. But the boss had thanked her when he rang earlier. There's no doubt she's one up on Clough.

'I'll take you home, Cathbad,' she says, not looking at him.

Nelson and Clara head for the door. Ruth thanks Clara profusely, trying to make up for last night's lack of trust. Nelson says nothing.

Judy gathers up her phone and bag. 'Coming, Cathbad?'

'There's no need to rush off,' says Ruth. She rather likes the idea of sitting here with Judy and Cathbad, eating toast and talking about the marvels of Kate.

'We'd better be off,' says Judy. 'I've got lots to do.'

'Yes, the wedding's in a couple of weeks, isn't it?' says Ruth, wanting to seem friendly. 'You must be so excited.'

'If you say so,' says Judy. Rather rudely, Ruth thinks.

*

As soon as the door shuts behind Cathbad and Judy, Kate starts to cry. Having been angelic all night ('She only woke up once,' said Cathbad, 'but I sang to her and she went back to sleep') she now transforms into Damien from *The Omen*. Ruth tries milk, food, dancing round the room, singing. But obviously her singing isn't a patch on Cathbad's because, after the first few bars of 'The Wheels on the Bus', Kate howls louder than ever. In desperation, Ruth switches on the TV, jiggling Kate up and down as she fumbles with the remote. She flicks between sonorous church services and black-and-white films, trying to find something child-friendly. Eventually Kate stops sobbing and stares entranced at the screen which is bright green with little figures running around madly. She might have guessed. Kate has obviously inherited the football gene from her father. Another thing to hold against him. But Ruth is too grateful for the peace to feel too aggrieved. She settles down on the sofa, with Kate against her shoulder, to watch Manchester United versus Chelsea.

This is how, ten minutes later, Tatjana finds her.

'I didn't know you were a football fan, Ruth.'

'Tatjana!'

Tatjana looks flushed and rather excited, she is still wearing her work clothes (a beautifully tailored suit and long black coat) and carrying her briefcase.

'What happened to you last night?' asks Ruth. 'You didn't answer any of my texts.'

'I couldn't get a signal.' Tatjana puts down her case and strokes Kate's cheek with a casual finger. Kate doesn't move her eyes from the football.

'Where did you stay?' asks Ruth.

‘With some friends from the university. The snow came down so quickly and I was told the roads here were impossible.’

‘They were. I was snowed in at Sea’s End House.’

‘Really? Who looked after the little one?’

‘Clara. Do you remember her from the naming day party?’

Tatjana opens her eyes wide. ‘The blonde girl who came with the German fellow? But you hardly know her.’

Ruth bristles. She is always on the alert for criticism of her mothering. In any case her sensitivity is heightened because she feels guilty at how quickly she jumped at the chance to leave Kate with a comparative stranger.

‘She’s a very nice girl.’

‘She’s the one whose boyfriend was killed, right?’

‘I hope you’re not suggesting—’ begins Ruth huffily.

‘I’m not suggesting anything,’ says Tatjana. ‘Coffee?’

There is a rather uncomfortable silence while Tatjana makes coffee. Kate still watches the football, entranced. She gurgles delightedly when Chelsea scores. Ruth isn’t sure whether Nelson would approve. Should she get up and help Tatjana with the coffee? In two weeks, this is the first time that Tatjana has offered to do anything in the kitchen. What did Tatjana mean about Clara? It’s one thing for Ruth to suspect her in the dark of Sea’s End House, quite another for Tatjana to imply that she had anything to do with Dieter’s murder. Oh well, maybe Ruth asked too many questions about last night. Tatjana’s a free agent after all.

When Tatjana puts a mug of coffee in front of her, she says, in a conciliatory tone, ‘Thanks, Tatjana. It’s been lovely having you here.’ Tatjana is due to go home in two days’ time.

‘I’ve enjoyed it very much,’ says Tatjana politely. ‘It’s been good to get to know you again. And to meet Kate.’

They both look at Kate, who has fallen asleep in Ruth’s arms. The football plays on, unnoticed. Ruth sips her coffee, careful to avoid the baby’s head. Suddenly Tatjana leans forward, her face urgent.

‘Make the most of her, Ruth,’ she says. ‘Enjoy her. It doesn’t last long.’

‘I will.’ Ruth’s throat contracts.

‘I only had Jacob for those few years,’ Tatjana is saying softly. ‘Now I wish I had spent every second of that time with him.’

Ruth eyes fill with tears. 'You couldn't have known.'

'No,' says Tatjana. She is tearless; her face has something of that blazing intensity that Ruth remembers from the evening in the pine forest. 'None of us can know. None of us can ever know what is going to happen. So take care of your baby, Ruth. She is all that matters.'

*

All that summer, Tatjana and Ruth had asked everyone they met about the little boy, his grandparents, the devastated village. When they met people from the south, near Trebinje, Tatjana became almost hysterical, thrusting her picture of Jacob into the faces of complete strangers, crying, begging them to help her. At other times, she was calm, almost clinical. She would tell Ruth again and again the story that had been told to her – the burning houses, the old people and children lined up, thinking they were going to be spared, the shots, the screams, the bodies flung into shallow graves only to be dug up again and buried who knew where. Ruth was Tatjana's only confidante, and at times she felt that the weight of all this grief was more than she could bear.

Once, she even tried to talk to Erik about it. She didn't want to betray Tatjana's secret, she just felt that she badly needed advice and who better to turn to than Erik, her mentor and friend?

It was hard to get hold of him. As the weeks went by, Erik seemed to spend more and more of his time fighting the authorities, mostly in the company of a Bosnian politician called Dragana (Ruth was to wonder about this relationship later). It was the old story. The various governments just wanted the graves exhumed; Erik wanted to spend time on forensic testing, cross-checking databases, trying to identify as many of the victims as possible. He began to take on a rather messianic appearance, wild-eyed, wild-haired, raving about the importance of knowing and naming the dead.

Then, one evening, she met him quite by chance. There was no running water at the hotel so they had a rota for carrying buckets up from the stream that ran through the town. The water was very pure, it came directly from the mountain, the locals said, but the archaeologists didn't take any risks; every drop had to be boiled and reboiled. Ruth was filling her buckets, standing knee

deep in the water and enjoying the sensation of the cold on her tired legs, when she saw Erik sitting on the bank, throwing stones into the fast-flowing stream.

‘Like Poohsticks,’ she had said.

Erik had smiled uncomprehendingly. He often didn’t get things like that.

‘How are you, Ruthie?’ He had got up to give her a hug. And, despite everything, Ruth remembers enjoying the moment, enjoying being alone with Erik in the cool, fernscented evening.

At a closer glance, Erik looked tired, his skin had a slightly stretched look and his famous blue eyes were ringed with red.

‘Are you okay?’ she had asked.

‘Are any of us okay?’ he had answered. Come to think of it, Erik was probably the person who taught Cathbad his conversational gambits.

‘I’m worried about Tatjana.’

And Erik had said, ‘Poor Tatjana, she will never find rest until she can bury his body.’

She hadn’t told him; but he had known anyway.

CHAPTER 26

Nelson and Clara drive in silence over the snowy marshes. Once or twice, Nelson's radio crackles into action but he ignores it. Clara stares out of the window, treating him as if he is a taxi driver – or her dad. When they reach the road to Broughton Sea's End, Nelson pulls into a lay-by.

Clara looks up. 'What—'

Nelson pulls the small leather book out of his pocket.

'Is this yours?'

Clara's face changes so quickly it is almost comical. 'That's mine!' she spits. 'You had no right to take it.'

'Listen, Clara,' says Nelson. 'I could get a search warrant and come back and turn your room over. Is that what you want?'

'You wouldn't dare,' says Clara. But her face has changed again, become watchful.

'Of course I dare,' says Nelson. 'This is a murder investigation, not some bloody silly kids' game.'

Clara makes another grab for the diary but Nelson holds it out of reach.

'In this diary you say you hate Dieter Eckhart and want to kill him.'

'I never said that!'

'Do you want me to read it to you?'

Clara puts her hand over her mouth as if to stop herself speaking. Nelson notices that the nails are bitten to the quick.

'When did you find out that Dieter was married?'

Clara says nothing.

'Must have been hard, to find out that your boyfriend was married with children.'

Silence.

'What would your parents say?'

That does the trick. Clara's under-lip wobbles. 'Don't tell them.'

'Clara.' Nelson attempts a gentle Judy-like tone. 'Did you kill Dieter?'

'No!' Clara sits up, suddenly fierce again.

Nelson takes a plastic bag from the back seat. In it is a see-through freezer bag (from Ruth's archaeology kit) containing the

scissors.

‘Are these yours?’

Clara stares at the bag as if she can’t believe her eyes.

‘Clara.’ More gently still. ‘Are these yours?’

Clara shakes her head. Her voice is child-like. ‘I borrowed them from Grandma. She uses them for gardening.’

‘When did you borrow them?’

‘I don’t remember. A few weeks ago.’

‘Why did you want them?’

‘I was cutting out a dress pattern. Dieter had invited me to a ball at the university. I wanted to make myself something nice.’ Her eyes fill with tears.

‘Do lots of dress-making do you?’

‘Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.’ They are angry tears now. She brushes them away with the back of her hand.

‘Clara ...’ He knows he can’t go too far just now. Plenty of time to speak to her later if the scissors offer any clues. If he questions her too hard now, alone without a colleague, there’s always the danger that she could lodge a complaint against him and jeopardise the whole investigation.

‘If you want to talk to me,’ he says, ‘you know where I am.’

Clara flashes him a contemptuous look. ‘Yeah. Right. Can you take me home now, please?’

*

After dropping Clara at Sea’s End House, Nelson drives straight home. Michelle had been fine about him not coming back last night (she could see what the weather was like, after all), but she might be less than happy about him going in to work, especially on a Sunday. Besides, he could do with a shower and a sleep.

More than anything, Nelson wants to go home and sleep for a week. He wants to hold his wife in his arms and drift into blameless unconsciousness. But, unfortunately, he is wracked with guilt so acute that he wonders if he will ever be able to close his eyes again. As if it’s not bad enough that he has betrayed his wife and slept with another woman, and that this other woman has given birth to his child, now he has to do it again. And what’s more, he would do it again if he could. He knows that now. Ruth has a hold over him, not just as the mother of his child either.

Last night, he had wanted to make love to her. As they sat at Jack Hastings' table in the candlelight, he had even fantasised that he was married to her. Married to a woman as bright and remarkable as Ruth, someone who would work side-by-side with him, someone who understands him, complements him, completes him. Whenever he thinks about Michelle, the first thing that comes to mind is her beauty. Nineteen years of marriage have not made him immune to the way she looks. The sight of her face can still make him catch his breath and, if he is honest, he enjoys having such a glamorous wife. If he was married to Ruth, people would no longer refer to his 'trophy wife' in half-admiring, half-resentful tones. No-one would say, 'what *does* she see in him', a comment that never fails to make him feel obscurely pleased with himself. But Nelson is attracted to Ruth, there's no denying it. And, last night, when he looked at her across the table, he had thought that she was beautiful, her full lips curving in a smile, her hair soft and untidy. He had wanted her, and although he might blame the snow, the isolation, the worry about Kate, that was the reason why he had taken her in his arms on Clara's bed. It was all his fault.

'It'll never happen again,' Ruth had said. Does that mean she doesn't want it to happen again? Nelson, even in his single days, was not a man much given to wondering if women fancied him or not. If he saw a woman he liked, he'd ask her out. If they said yes, he assumed that meant they liked him. If not; their loss. With Michelle, there had been no ambiguity. He had fallen in love with her the moment he saw her, in the Blackpool Rock Shop. Michelle had been with her little sister, buying brightly coloured sweets for party bags. Nelson had gone in with a friend to buy a joke present for a stag do. They had got chatting. Nelson, oblivious of his friend's rolling eyes and the little sister's giggles, had asked for Michelle's phone number. 'She's out of your league, mate,' his friend had said as they left the shop clutching a disgustingly phallic stick of rock. But Nelson had never thought so. She'd given him her number, hadn't she? And he was right. They were married six months later.

So he is not really equipped to work out whether Ruth is in love with him or not. The sex, he has to admit, is fantastic. They are bound together forever because of Kate, but love? He doesn't say the word, even to himself. He does know that sometimes he

fantasises that he could have them both, the beautiful wife and the brilliant mistress, that he could enjoy both his teenage daughters and his miraculous baby. But he knows that life isn't like that. Nelson was brought up a Catholic. He knows that he is overdue some gigantic, cosmic retribution. The best he can hope for, he thinks, as he turns wearily into his drive, is that it holds off long enough for him to solve this case.

Entering the house, he is met by the most wonderful smell, the smell of childhood, evocative enough to make his mouth water and his eyes prickle. Michelle comes into the hall, wearing an apron over a designer tracksuit.

'I thought I'd do a roast for a change,' she says. 'It's such a cold day.'

Nelson kisses his wife's scented cheek. Over her shoulder he can see Rebecca actually laying the table. Light shines on the glasses, cutlery and matching place mats (Lancashire scenes). Radio 2 is playing in the kitchen and the aroma of roast beef fills the air.

Nelson buries his face in Michelle's neck to hide his guilt.

*

After lunch, Nelson dozes in front of the football. Michelle and Rebecca have gone to Michelle's health club for a swim. Nelson knows he would sleep better upstairs but it's unthinkable for a healthy man to take to his bed in the middle of the afternoon. Besides, Man U are playing. So he drifts between sleeping and waking: Michelle, Ruth, a boat drifting in the dark harbour, the snow falling on the beach, the sound of shots in the night, Clara's face when he showed her the diary, a stooped figure standing on the landing.

Suddenly, he sits bolt upright.

What was Irene, who slept downstairs because it was 'easier', doing on the tower landing at midnight?

Clara said that the scissors belonged to her grandmother.

Nelson goes into the study where he has stored the boxes of parish magazines plus another box marked 'Sea's End'. In it are Hugh Anselm's papers and the ciné film, as well as some photos given to him by Stella Hastings. He takes out one photo and puts it in his wallet. Then he writes a brief note to Michelle and leaves

the house.

At first there's no answer from Maria's bedsit then, just as he is turning away, a slightly scared voice says, 'Who is it?'

'It's DCI Nelson, Maria. Can I come up for a minute?'

The entry phone buzzes and Nelson takes the steps three at a time.

The room is scrupulously clean as ever. No smell of Sunday roast and no TV blaring in the background. Maria and her little boy are obviously in the middle of some board game. George is sitting on the floor, rolling a dice with great concentration.

'Snakes and ladders,' explains Maria.

'Grand,' says Nelson. 'My favourite game, though there's always a great big snake right at the end.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Maria is still looking worried.

'No thanks, love. I just wanted to show you a photo if that's all right.'

'A photo?'

'Yes.' Nelson pulls the picture from his wallet.

'You remember you said that Archie used to have a visitor, an old lady. Was this her, by any chance?'

Maria looks at the photo of Irene sitting outside Sea's End House. It was taken about a year ago, Stella had said.

'Yes,' says Maria slowly. 'That is the lady. Mrs Hastings.'

CHAPTER 27

After George has gone to sleep, Maria always likes to look out of the window for a while. Not that the view's anything much – a garage forecourt, the houses across the street – once the sort of places where she could imagine a family living, now mostly bedsits like hers – the side of a giant billboard advertising a car, shiny red against a shiny blue background. But she likes sitting there in the darkened room (she doesn't want to put the overhead light on because of George), watching the world outside: the cars drawing into the garage, sales reps in suits impatiently tapping their feet as they wait for the tank to fill, harassed parents, young men with tattoos and cars with extra bits stuck to them; people hurrying past under the streetlights, lights going on in the bedsits, one after the other. She is hundreds of miles away from her family but, somehow, these faceless, anonymous strangers have become her family. And sitting there in the dark listening to George's noisy breathing (she must see the doctor about his sinuses again), she feels a curious affection, almost love, for the people outside. They all have their own lives, their little circles of light, but she, from her vantage point, can watch over them all. Sometimes she'll pick on one person, a woman labouring with heavy shopping or a pale-faced man jingling his loose change at the petrol pump, and say a decade of the rosary, especially for them. They'll never know, of course, but it makes her feel happy to do it.

Tonight, though, she doesn't feel cosy and secure. She feels jolted, uneasy. She knows why. It was that policeman, Nelson, coming here and asking questions. She doesn't like the police. She always suspects that when people see how she lives, how little money she has, they'll try to take George away from her. When he left, Nelson had tried to give her five pounds, 'to buy George a present'. She'd refused, almost angrily. She may only be an ignorant girl from the Philippines but she knew that you should never take money from a man, especially a policeman. She'd made her mistake once, with George's father, just a few months after she'd arrived in England, but she's not going to be caught again.

Archie had been different. Of course, he'd been an old man, old enough to be her grandfather, as he'd often said. But sometimes he didn't seem like an old man at all. His voice, for one thing, was still strong and echoing, not thin and apologetic like the old people at home. Archie still sounded like a soldier. Some of the other carers didn't like it; they thought he was too bossy, too full of himself. But Maria liked a man to be a man. She didn't mind Archie telling her what to do; he was her elder, after all. They had nice conversations, sitting in his little room in the evenings; they talked about George, about Maria's plans for him. He would grow up to be an important man, just like his father, and do great things in the world. Archie was an important man, Maria was sure of that. That was why it was wrong that he had been taken, suddenly in the night like that. Dorothy said they weren't to talk about it but Maria knew what she thought. It wasn't right. It wasn't what God intended.

Even the garage isn't the same tonight. Usually it is a great comfort to her because it is open for twenty-four hours, its little kiosk a beacon of hope through the night. But, tonight, there don't seem to be any cars, just one figure, in a long, black coat, standing beside the tyre gauge. Maria doesn't like the figure. She knows that people without cars shouldn't hang around garages but this person has been there for twenty minutes at least, just standing, not going into the shop or anything, just waiting, out of view of everyone except her. Maria goes away to check on George. When she comes back, the figure is still there. Is it a man or a woman? She can't tell. The person has a long coat and a woolly hat, its hair is hidden and she can't see its shape. Maria watches for another five minutes before she realises the awful truth. She isn't watching the figure. The figure is watching her.

*

Tired as he is, Nelson can't sleep. Michelle has gone to bed and Rebecca is watching some music programme in the sitting room. Nelson sits in the study, going through Hugh Anselm's papers. He doesn't know why he is doing this or what he expects to find. He just knows that he needs a breakthrough. Could Irene, over ninety at his guess, really have killed three people to protect her husband's name? It's unlikely, to say the least. Perhaps she could

have stopped Hugh's stairlift, maybe even smothered Archie, but kill Dieter Eckhart, a fit young man in the prime of life? Surely not. Could someone have done it for her? Jack, for instance, or even Clara?

He should watch the film again but he just can't face it tonight. He can't face seeing Hugh Anselm, so earnest, so tormented, so *young*. Nelson isn't given to flights of fancy, but when he was watching the film he had the curious sensation that Hugh was speaking directly to him. Tell people about this, he was saying. Don't let this happen again. Find the person who killed me.

Hugh Anselm's papers date from about 1960. There is nothing about the murders and, as far as he can see, very little about the Home Guard. From 1960 onwards Hugh Anselm had kept a diary, which takes up about twenty exercise books. He didn't write every day and what he did write was mostly about politics. Hugh had high hopes of J.F. Kennedy and of Harold Wilson and, in both cases, disillusionment set in fairly quickly. He lost faith in Kennedy over the Bay of Pigs and, to Hugh Anselm, Kennedy's assassination was 'a tragedy but perhaps better to remember him this way? Otherwise his presidency would surely have dissolved in a haze of scandal and broken promises.' He admired Wilson for standing up to America over Vietnam and, especially, for setting up the Open University (Anselm was a great fan of further education, always going on courses) but he felt that, ultimately, Wilson had 'betrayed the workers'. Anselm's greatest loathing, though, is reserved for Margaret Thatcher. Page after page is devoted to her iniquities, her jingoism, her lack of compassion, even her hair ('dreadful helmet-like arrangement') and her voice ('reeking of insincerity'). Was this because Margaret Thatcher was Conservative or because she was a woman, wonders Nelson. He begins to detect, under Anselm's fervent socialism, a thin vein of snobbishness and sexism which made him deplore Shirley Williams' dress sense and wish that Tony Benn had retained his title.

There is very little about Anselm's personal life. His wife Anne is referred to mainly in terms of her political opinions. 'Anne has a fatal weakness for David Owen.' 'Anne thinks that Thatcher possesses normal maternal feelings – I disagree.' There are a few mentions of his brother Stephen ('Steve is one of nature's Tories.') and one reference to his niece Joyce ('a dreadful girl'). The only

items of real interest are two letters, obviously in draft form, stuck in the back of one of the files.

The first is to Archie Whitcliffe:

Dear Archie (I am tempted to call you Archibald just to see you wince!)

You will wonder at hearing from me after all these years. I hope those years have been kind to you as, in part, they have been to me. I was prompted to write after reading of the promotion to Police Superintendent of one Gerald Whitcliffe. A brief check on the internet (a wonderful invention – are you ‘on-line’?) revealed that this high-flyer was, in fact, your grandson. How proud you must be, dear Archie, and how wonderful to have grandchildren. My wife and I were never blessed with children and my dear Anne passed away last year.

Maybe it was this sad event which led to increasing thoughts of the past. Indeed, I find that, these days, I dwell more in the past than in the present. And this has led to a great desire to see you again, my old comrade. Not to discuss [this next word is heavily crossed out] but merely to reminisce, two old friends together. Is it not about time? Maybe you too have had a letter from Daniel? It brought back so many [...]

Here the letter ends, obviously unfinished. Was a finished version ever sent? Did the two old friends ever meet? There is nothing in the files to suggest that they did.

The second letter is to Irene Hastings:

Dear Irene,

What a pleasure to see you again after all these years. I did enjoy our morning together. Thank you for your condolences on the death of my dear Anne. You, of all people, will know what it is like to lose your helpmate of so many years. With reference to our discussion [...]

Here this letter, too, tails off.

So it seems that Irene Hastings had visited Hugh Anselm as well as Archie Whitcliffe. There is no date on either letter but Kevin Fitzgerald had said that Anne Anselm died eight years ago. In the letter to Archie, Hugh mentions his wife dying ‘last year’. The letter to Irene may have been sent just after Anne’s death, as

Irene had been offering her condolences. What did Hugh discuss with Irene? Why was neither letter finished?

It occurs to Nelson that he never found that other letter, the letter that Archie was reading on the morning that he died. He peers at the crossed-out word in Hugh Anselm's letter to Archie Whitcliffe. He thinks it is 'Lucifer'.

*

Maria stands in the shadows, watching the figure. Her heart is beating so loudly that it seems as if the whole building must echo with it. When she turns and sees George sleeping peacefully, it's as if she has ventured into another world: the night light, the statue of Our Lady, her work clothes hanging on the door. Then, looking back to the window, He is still there. She has started to think of the figure as He. Only a man could be that threatening, she is sure of this. He is now standing almost directly under her window, staring up. Sometimes He seems to disappear into the darkness, then a car passes and, briefly, she sees him. Still there, still waiting. Light, dark, light, dark.

Maria herself is now in darkness. She wishes she could draw the blinds but she's scared to show herself, even for a second. Flattened against the wall, she hopes that she can see him without him seeing her. What does he want with her? She says a few hurried Hail Marys but that doesn't shift him. She wracks her brain for a suitable saint. St Jude of Hopeless Causes? St Agnes who grew a beard to scare off a persistent suitor? Is this man a suitor? It's possible. A few men have pursued her, sometimes persistently. There was the cleaner at work who left a huge bunch of flowers outside her door. That had scared her. He knew where she lived. How had he got through the security door? For weeks she'd slept with a knife by her bed but then the cleaner had got another job and moved away and she had been safe once more.

But this man isn't a suitor, she is sure. He doesn't love her. There is nothing hopeful or expectant in the way he is standing. He is watching, as if they are playing a board game and he is waiting for her next move. When she moves, he will strike. He doesn't want to marry her; he wants to kill her.

*

Nelson yawns and rubs his eyes. He's exhausted but he doesn't want to go to bed just yet. If he leaves it a bit longer Michelle will be asleep. If she is awake, she might be in the mood for sex and, for the first time in his married life, Nelson doesn't want to sleep with his wife. He doesn't think he could stand the guilt.

He sits at the desk, listening to the TV in the next room. Hugh Anselm's words – pedantic, intelligent, sometimes sad – run on a constant loop through his head. Who had visited Hugh in February, switched off his stairlift and left him to die, struggling with the seatbelt, trying to reach the controls? Who had come to Archie's room in the night, smothered him and departed without a sound? Who had stabbed Dieter Eckhart and thrown his body into the sea? Was it the same person or three different people?

We have only told one other person that this film exists. The last of the three of us left alive will leave instructions as to where to find this evidence.

The last of the three ...

Nelson goes back to Hugh Anselm's unfinished letters. *Maybe you too have had a letter from Daniel?*

He hears Irene Hastings' voice, the first time he met her. *Well, there were a few young boys. You could be in the Home Guard if you were too young or too old to fight. I'm not sure about Hugh or Danny. Archie's still alive, though ...*

Danny. Daniel. The mysterious third man. The man whose surname no-one remembers. The man who has vanished. But Hugh had a letter from him and, knowing Hugh, he will have kept the letter.

He goes back through the file, his eyes trained for any name beginning with D. Daniel Abse, the MP. Danny de Vito, the actor (Hugh was an unexpected fan of the American sitcom *Taxi*). Daniel Barenboim (admired for his work in the Middle East). But no letters from an ex-comrade called Daniel or Danny.

Eventually, in desperation, he goes back to the *Broughton and Rockham Parish News*. There, between a recipe for snoek casserole and an exhortation to Dig for Victory, he finds it. December 1940.

TRAGIC DEATH OF BROUGHTON LAD

The body washed ashore on the beach at Broughton was yesterday identified as being that of Daniel West, 18, son of Marjorie and the late Lawrence West of the High Street,

Broughton. Daniel was an apprentice fitter at Jensen's Garage and a keen member of the Home Guard. He was hoping to be called up in the New Year. Mr Stephen Jensen, 50, described the boy as 'a real hard worker' and offered his condolences to his mother.

So Daniel West had died, only a few months after the six Germans were murdered. It seems inconceivable that neither Irene nor Archie would remember this fact. But not as inconceivable as the fact that Hugh Anselm apparently had a letter from Daniel some seventy years after he died. It can't be the same Daniel. Surely?

He jumps because his phone is ringing. He can't find it at first because it has fallen into the box of papers. He gets it on the last note of the ring tone.

Clough.

'You'd better get down here, boss. It's that girl, Maria. She reckons someone's trying to kill her.'

CHAPTER 28

It is past midnight when Nelson arrives at Maria's bedsit. Maria is sitting at the table with Clough beside her. A uniformed PC is checking the area around the house. George is asleep in the double bed. The whole thing feels slightly surreal, not least because their conversation has to be conducted in whispers. The room is dark apart from George's nightlight, which projects blue stars and moons onto the ceiling. Maria is clearly very upset – she has a mug in front of her and when she raises it to drink, her hand shakes.

'I made her tea,' says Clough. Rather defensively, Nelson thinks.

'Wonderful. I'll put you in for a medal.'

'She was hysterical.'

Maria raises huge, tear-washed eyes to his face. 'Someone is waiting outside my house. Someone is trying to kill me.'

'All right, Maria. Let's start at the beginning.'

Nelson tries to speak softly but George stirs in his sleep. Maria's face crumples. 'He must get his sleep! He's got school tomorrow.'

'Okay, okay.' Nelson lowers his voice another notch. 'Tell me about this mysterious person outside your house.'

'It was about nine o'clock. I was looking out of my window and I saw him. Looking at me.'

'Where was he standing, exactly?'

Maria takes Nelson to the window and points. The garage forecourt is deserted, the only light comes from the kiosk and from a huge illuminated advert for a Volkswagen Golf. As Nelson watches, a policeman comes slowly into view, shining his torch in wide, careful arcs. Nelson recognises him as Roy 'Rocky' Taylor, a local boy. Definitely not the brightest bulb in the box.

'He was standing there,' says Maria. 'Looking up. I see him at nine, ten, again at eleven.'

'Did he just stand there all the time?'

'Yes. But, at ten past eleven, there is a ring at my bell. I know it is him.'

'Did you answer?'

'No. I ring this number. It is the lady policeman, Judy, who

came with you.' She shows him Judy's card. 'I ring Judy because I think she is kind.'

'Sergeant Johnson wasn't on duty,' puts in Clough. 'So I answered the call.'

Maria looks at him doubtfully.

PC Taylor appears at the door and Nelson goes to speak to him. There is no sign of any man hanging around. The people in the garage haven't seen anything. Their CCTV cameras don't cover the area near Maria's block of flats. Nelson wonders if the mysterious lurker knew this. He asks if Taylor has spoken to any of the other residents in the building. No, says the policeman stolidly, no-one asked him to.

Nelson sighs. 'All right, Taylor. Wait for us in the car.'

He turns back to Maria who is sitting back at the table. Clough is beside her, just far enough away to be professional.

'Maria, did you get a good look at this man?'

'No. It is dark. He is wearing dark clothes and a hat.'

'What sort of hat?'

'A knitted one. Like the hat George wears for football.'

'What colour?'

'Black.'

'Did you see his face? When he was looking up?'

'Not really.'

'Was he pale skinned? Dark?' Nelson treads warily in the PC minefield.

'Pale. Like you.'

'What was he wearing?'

'A long dark coat. Trousers.'

'Are you sure it was a man?' asks Clough.

Maria looks at him, her lip quivering. 'No.'

Clough and Nelson exchange glances. Nelson feels so tired that he can barely speak. There doesn't seem to be any evidence of Maria's mystery prowler but, then again, she was the person who was given Archie's cryptic clue, the unwitting recipient of a seventy-year-old secret. Could someone be trying to scare her? Could someone be trying to find the code for themselves?

'Maria,' he says. His soothing whisper comes out more like a sinister croak. 'You remember that Archie left you some books in his will?'

'Yes.' Maria looks up, surprised.

‘Can I see them? The actual books.’

Maria goes to the black trunk beside the bed. She lifts the lid with difficulty (Clough rushes to help) and pulls out the eight battered paperbacks. Avoiding Clough’s eye, Nelson carefully fans through the pages. In *Evil Under the Sun* he finds what he is looking for. A letter.

‘Did you know this was here?’ he asks Maria.

Maria looks bemused. ‘No.’

‘Do you mind if I borrow this for a bit?’

‘No.’

Nelson folds the letter and puts it in his pocket. He is sure Ruth would have told him to wear gloves.

At the door, he asks, ‘Maria, did you tell anyone that Archie left you the books?’

‘Everyone at the home knew. Dorothy said it was a tribute to us all. That he left me something.’

Nelson isn’t so sure about this. If Archie had wanted to pay tribute to Greenfields Care Home, he could easily have done it openly. No, the books were for Maria alone.

‘Anyone else?’ he asks.

‘My mother. I phone her every Sunday. I told her.’

Nelson looks around the room, at the sleeping child under the blue light, the statue of Mary, the bare walls, the uniform hanging on the door, the breakfast plates already laid out next to the sink. He thinks of the letter in his pocket. Did anyone else know it was there?

‘Try not to worry, Maria,’ he says. ‘I’m sure it was just some down-and-out looking for somewhere to kip. But I’ll have a patrol car come past every half hour or so, just to make sure he doesn’t come back. If you’re scared for any reason, just ring me.’

‘Or me,’ says Clough.

‘You’re very kind,’ says Maria. ‘You’d better go now. George needs his sleep.’

*

Driving home, windows open to keep him awake, Nelson thinks about Maria and her delicate, compassionate relationship with Archie Whitcliffe. Why had the old man left her his books? Why did he make her the guardian of this secret, protected so long and

with such ingenuity? Had Archie discussed his will with Hugh Anselm? Is this what was agreed at their last meeting, if it ever took place? *The last of the three of us left alive will leave instructions as to where to find this evidence.* Archie had been the last of the three. Why had he decided to pass on his secret in this way?

The house is dark. Michelle and Rebecca must both be in bed, but when Nelson goes into the study he sees that the computer is still on. By the blue light of the computer screen, he takes the letter from his pocket and reads:

Dear Archie and Hugh,

By the time you get this I will be long dead. I have asked my younger sister to post this on her eightieth birthday which will be in the year 2001. Can you imagine that date? I can't. What I think is that the world will have ended by then. Maybe some asteroid will have hit us just like Hugh is always saying.

I'm sorry but I just can't live with it. Knowing what we did to those poor fellows that night. I keep dreaming about it, and in my dreams they are coming for me because they know it was my fault. I should have stopped them. I know you tried, Hugh, but it wasn't enough. I know we have made the film so that one day everyone will know what happened but I can't help thinking that we need some sort of sacrifice. A life for a life. So that is what I am going to do. Tomorrow morning, before it is light, I am going down to the beach at Broughton. I am going to swim out beyond Sea's End Point. I am going to swim and swim until I can swim no more and then I am going to let the sea take me. It sounds beautiful put like that, doesn't it? I don't think it will be beautiful but it will be right. Then maybe the rest of you can live your lives in peace.

I hope so much that you will be reading this at the end of long, happy lives.

Your friend,

Danny

Nelson sits there for a long time in the dark, the letter in his hand. He is sure, beyond any doubt, that this is the letter that Archie was reading on the night that he died. The letter that he had hidden for so many years inside the Agatha Christie classic. Was the title somehow significant? *Evil Under the Sun*? But these murders were committed by the light of the moon, witnessed only

by Jack Hastings' wakeful little brother, himself now dead.

Archie's memories must have been stirred by Nelson's visit, which is why he went to sleep that night with the word 'Lucifer' on his lips. Lucifer – the plan to turn the seas into fire. Or maybe even a reference to Buster Hastings, the 'old devil' himself, the man who had murdered five people in cold blood (not forgetting the man killed by his loyal sergeant) and forced his troop to take a blood oath, promising to keep his secret forever. Archie had kept his promise but, while he slept that night, someone had come into his room and suffocated him. Who is still alive who would kill to protect the Hastings name?

And who else might they kill?

CHAPTER 29

All in all, Ruth is relieved to go to work on Monday morning. A policeman returned her car late on Sunday night and, by then, a lot of the snow had melted. During Sunday evening, as she and Tatjana watched TV, huge chunks of snow kept falling off her roof. When she went to bed, early because she was exhausted, she could see dark patches appearing in the Saltmarsh and the tops of the reeds emerging from the blanket of whiteness.

Monday morning is bright, almost spring-like. As she drives to work, the roads are clear, the snow remaining only as dirty sludge in the gutters. The university grounds are still white though. A huge snowman draped in a UNN scarf stands at the entrance to the Natural Sciences block but, as Ruth passes, its head falls forward, like a deposed tyrant. Soon all the snow will disappear, like a dream of winter. That's what Saturday night must be, Ruth tells herself sternly, a dream. Now she must get on with real life. She sighs, climbing the stairs to the archaeology corridor.

She has a meeting with the Field Team at ten. Trace isn't there but Ted, Craig and Steve squash into Ruth's tiny office and Ruth tells them briefly about the discovery of the film. The team are still employed by the university on their erosion survey but Ruth feels she needs to keep them updated as they were the ones that found the bodies in the first place. She has agreed with Nelson that she won't go into any detail, will just say that new evidence has emerged. She can't say how the film was found, either, though naturally the archaeologists are intrigued. Ted, in particular, keeps asking very awkward questions. 'How come this film has turned up after seventy-odd years? Who were the men anyway? That Dieter bloke said they were German. Have you any idea who killed them?'

'I can't tell you any more,' Ruth keeps saying. 'It's confidential. The police are still investigating.'

'Are they investigating Dieter's death?' asks Ted. 'Looks pretty suspicious to me.'

'I really can't say.'

Craig comes to her rescue by asking about Operation Lucifer.

With relief, Ruth describes the explosive trail laid along the North Norfolk coast, the fire ships, the barrels of gun cotton.

‘We’ll get down there this morning and have another look around,’ says Ted. ‘We’ve still got a few miles of coast to go.’

‘Well, be careful,’ says Ruth. ‘Some of the explosives may still be primed.’

Her whole life, she thinks, as the door closes behind the three men, seems suddenly to be full of unexploded bombs. Sure enough, before the Field Team have clumped to the end of the corridor, Phil appears, smiling engagingly.

‘Can I have a word, Ruth?’

‘I’ve got a tutorial in an hour.’

‘It’ll only take a minute.’

Phil sits opposite, crinkling his eyes in what Shona probably tells him is an attractive way.

‘What about that snow, eh? Shona and I took the boys sledging. Great fun.’

‘It must have been.’

‘What was New Road like? Must have been hellish, out there in the back of beyond.’

‘The snow was fairly deep on Saturday. It had cleared by this morning.’

‘Shona tells me you’ve been making some exciting discoveries.’

Ruth curses herself for telling Shona about the lighthouse trip. She’d only done it because she wanted Shona to babysit.

‘Yes. We’ve found some new evidence about the bodies found at Broughton Sea’s End.’

Phil cocks his head on one side, inviting her to say more.

‘I’m not sure how much I can tell you,’ says Ruth awkwardly. ‘It’s a police matter.’

‘Oh, come on, Ruth. I’m your head of department.’

This is true. But it’s also true that Ruth is now seconded to the Serious Crimes Unit, part of the police team. She has a foot in both camps and the ground between has suddenly become a minefield.

‘Dieter Eckhart, poor chap.’ Phil ducks his head piously. ‘He said the bodies were German.’

‘Yes, we’re pretty sure that they were German soldiers. The oxygen isotope analysis points that way.’

‘Do you know how they were killed?’

‘They were shot.’

Phil’s eyes widen. ‘By the British?’

‘We have a statement to that effect.’

‘A statement? From whom?’

‘I don’t think I can say.’

Phil changes tack. ‘What about Eckhart’s death? There are a lot of rumours floating around.’

‘The police are investigating.’

‘Do they think it was murder?’

‘I can’t say.’

‘They do then.’

Ruth says nothing, and after loitering maddeningly for a few minutes Phil drifts away.

*

Monday is a busy teaching day for Ruth. She has another tutorial at two. She has a quick sandwich in the canteen and escapes to her office to prepare, treading warily as she passes Phil’s open door. She doesn’t want to get trapped into giving anything else away.

She is just finishing her sandwich and reading about bone disease in preparation for her students, when the phone rings. It’s Craig. He and Ted have found a boat on the beach just beyond Broughton. It looks old. Could it be one of the fire ships she was mentioning? Does she want to come and have a look?

Ruth does want to, very much. She longs to escape from the university and do some real archaeology, examine a piece of evidence, feel the sun and wind on her face. But even if she leaves straight after her tutorial she still won’t be back in time to pick up Kate at five. Sandra probably wouldn’t mind keeping her an hour longer, or maybe Tatjana would go and pick her up? Tatjana’s conference has finished and she was just saying that morning that she hadn’t anything to do today. She leaves tomorrow, her bags are packed and she’s done all the touristy things in King’s Lynn and Norwich. Ruth has avoided asking Tatjana to have anything to do with Kate but surely she won’t mind this one little favour. After all, Ruth has had her to stay for nearly three weeks.

She rings Tatjana on her mobile. She hadn’t expected it to be

difficult, had even expected Tatjana to interrupt and offer to get Kate, but Tatjana hears her out in silence. Ruth stammers and repeats herself. She remembers how much she hates asking for favours. When she has talked herself to a standstill, Tatjana says, 'Let me get this straight. You want me to pick up your daughter?'

Ruth does not like the way she says 'your daughter'.

'Yes,' she mutters.

'Just because you can't be bothered?'

'No! It's not that. It's just that Craig has found something which might be interesting ...'

'Interesting but not vital. There's no necessity for you to go today is there?'

'No but ...'

'You expect us all to run round after you, don't you?' Tatjana is laughing but her voice does not sound amused. 'Shona, me, Judy. We all have to look after your baby because you're too busy swanning around with Detective Inspector Nelson, pretending to solve crimes. That's not your job, Ruth. Your job is being a mother.'

'My job is being an archaeologist.'

'Yes, right.' Tatjana laughs again. 'How is that going, Ruth? How many papers have you written? Where's that book you were always going to write? It didn't happen, did it?'

'I've been—'

'Busy? Yes, busy having a baby without a father.'

Ruth is speechless. This is the sort of thing her mother says. Not Tatjana, who is meant to be her friend.

'I'm sorry you feel like this,' she says at last.

'Yes.' Suddenly Tatjana sounds very tired. 'I'm sorry too. Sorry for all of us. Especially Kate.' And she rings off.

Ruth is shaking. She looks at her phone as if it holds the key to Tatjana's outburst. She had known that Tatjana disapproved of her asking Clara to babysit, she had known and she had understood. Who knows better than she how Tatjana feels about putting career before children? Why had she ever thought that Tatjana would be on her side? Tatjana despises her for leaving her daughter in other people's care while she 'swans around' with Nelson. But she had never expected so much vitriol, so much ... *hatred* was the only word. There was such a depth of contempt in Tatjana's voice that Ruth feels as if she has been physically

attacked. And she feels humiliated too. She had thought she was doing quite well, trying to do the famous juggling thing, trying to be a good mother and keep her job, trying not to rely on other people. But it turns out that Tatjana thinks she is relying on other people. Is that what everyone thinks about her? Shona, Judy, Cathbad, Phil? Look at Ruth pretending to be a policeman. She can't even be bothered to look after her own baby, just dumps the poor thing with a childminder. She's not fit to have a child.

And maybe it's true. Hadn't she summoned Shona to take charge of Kate while they were excavating the bodies on the beach? This, despite the fact that Shona obviously couldn't cope and had let Kate scream herself almost sick. And even though Shona was clueless about babies, hadn't Ruth left Kate with her again so she could go to a hen night, of all frivolous things? What sort of mother was Ruth, anyway, drinking in wine bars and clubs, coming home past midnight? And she'd left Kate with Clara, someone she barely knew, just so that she could hang around on the edge of Nelson's investigations, lapping up vicarious glory. Seconded to the Serious Crimes Unit indeed! Who is she trying to kid? It was all Ruth's fault that Clara had been snowed in with Kate, that Judy had to risk her life driving over the snow-covered marshes. No wonder Judy's hardly spoken to her since. And now she'd done it again. She has obviously deeply insulted Tatjana. And why? Just so that she can go and dig up an old boat, probably just some fishing boat that ran aground in a storm.

By the time her students arrive, standing self-consciously in the open doorway, shuffling their papers, Ruth has decided to go straight home after the tutorial. She'll stop all this ridiculous detective business. It's no business of hers whether the wreck is that of a fire ship, part of Operation Lucifer. It's no business of hers who murdered Archie Whitcliffe, Hugh Anselm or Dieter Eckhart. Her job, as Tatjana pointed out, is being a mother. She'd better get on with it.

It's not one of her best tutorials. Luckily, the students do most of the work themselves, one of them reading a paper, the others discussing it. They are all mature students from China and America and they are scrupulously polite to each other. All Ruth has to do is to steer the conversation in certain directions and to correct some misconceptions about Neanderthal Man. Then they

are backing out of her room, the Chinese students literally bowing.

Ruth's phone rings. It's Nelson.

'Ruth, I'm off to Sea's End House. There's a few more questions I need to ask. What are you doing?'

'Well, Craig, one of the field team, rang to say that they'd found a boat on the beach just beyond Broughton. They think it might be a fire ship. You know, part of the coastal defence.'

'Are you going down to have a look at it?'

'I might do.'

'I'll see you there, if so. And Ruth?'

'What?'

'Be careful.'

Ruth turns off the phone but, almost immediately, switches it back on to call Sandra. She'll just have a quick look at the boat. She'll be home by six at the latest.

*

Nelson had asked if he could speak to Irene on her own, but when he reaches Sea's End House he is told by Stella that her mother-in-law is unwell and can't be disturbed.

'What is it?' Nelson does not return Stella's smile.

'The doctor thinks it may be a small stroke.'

'Jesus.' Nelson is taken aback. A stroke is serious. Why aren't they running about calling ambulances?

'At Mother's age these things are almost inevitable,' says Stella, leading the way into the sitting room. 'There's no point her going into hospital. She might as well stay here, peacefully, in her own bed.'

There is an air of resignation about her which Nelson finds disturbing. In her own bed. People talk about dying 'in their own bed'. He's not going to do that. He's going to die in a speeding car or saving some child from drowning. Peace is overrated, in his opinion.

'How old is Irene?'

'Ninety-three.' Again, that calm smile.

It seems odd not to have Irene fussing about with the tea. There's no sign of Jack or Clara either. But that suits Nelson. Stella has always struck him as the sanest one of the family.

‘Jack and Clara have taken the dogs for a long walk,’ explains Stella. ‘Jack needed to get out of the house. He’s been so worried about Irene. And Clara could do with a break too. She’s had a bad time of it recently.’

‘Was she very upset about Dieter Eckhart’s death?’

‘Very. I think she really cared about him.’

‘Was she in love with him?’

Stella looks slightly reproving. ‘They’d only known each other for a few weeks.’

But it happens, Nelson wants to tell her. Didn’t he fall in love with Michelle as soon as he saw her, that day in the Blackpool Rock Shop?

‘Mrs Hastings,’ says Nelson. On Saturday night they had been on first name terms but that seems a long time ago. ‘How much do you know about the war years at Sea’s End House?’

‘Quite a lot,’ says Stella placidly. ‘More than Jack, I daresay. Irene talked to me a lot. Buster too. I was very interested.’

‘Did you know that Irene used to visit Archie Whitcliffe?’

‘Yes. She was fond of him. Buster had been almost like a father to him.’

It seems odd to think of the elderly man with the regimental tie having a father, surrogate or otherwise. Nelson remembers what Archie said about Buster Hastings. *Hell of a chap. A real old devil. One of the old school.* Not the most loving of descriptions.

‘What about Hugh Anselm? Did she visit him?’

‘She went once, a few years ago. She wasn’t so close to Hugh. I don’t think Buster liked him much, he always referred to him as that damned commie.’ She laughs softly.

‘Did you ever meet Hugh?’

‘Yes. I drove Irene over to see him that time.’

‘And Archie?’

‘Once or twice.’

It’s incredible, reflects Nelson. He had thought that Jack was the key to Sea’s End House but all the time it was the quiet woman sitting in front of him. She had known all Irene’s wartime stories, she remembers Buster, she had taken Irene to visit both Archie and Hugh.

‘Mrs Hastings, did Buster ever talk about Daniel West?’

‘Daniel West? No, I don’t think so. Who is he?’

‘He was a young boy in Buster Hastings’ platoon. He killed

himself in 1940.'

'Killed himself? How horrible.'

'He killed himself to escape the memory of a war crime committed by Buster Hastings and his men.'

'What do you mean, war crime?'

'Has your husband told you about the film we were watching that day at your house? The day when it snowed?'

'Only that it was some nonsense produced by Hugh.'

'In the film Hugh Anselm accuses Captain Hastings and his sergeant of killing six defenceless German soldiers. The six bodies we found at Broughton Sea's End.'

'That's not true!'

'Your husband believed it.'

'Jack? He can't have.'

'You said yourself that the war was a desperate time. People do desperate things in desperate times.'

She looks at him as if half conceding the point. In the background, a clock ticks.

'Mrs Hastings,' says Nelson. 'Do you know how Hugh Anselm died?'

Stella's brow furrows. 'Some sort of accident, wasn't it?'

'He was found dead in his stairlift.'

'How terrible.'

'We think foul play may have been involved.'

He meant to shock her and he does. Her eyes widen and her hand clenches on the arm of her chair.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that someone deliberately stopped the stairlift. Someone who knew that Hugh Anselm had a heart condition and that the agitation of trying to free himself would be likely to kill him.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'Archie Whitcliffe was suffocated,' says Nelson brutally. 'I think the same person killed both men.'

'Archie? Suffocated? I don't believe you.'

'A post mortem examination cannot lie,' says Nelson, though they can and do.

There is a silence. Out of the French windows, Nelson can see the sea, brightest blue under a paler blue sky. A white-sailed yacht moves slowly across the horizon.

‘Detective Chief Inspector,’ Stella is very pale but her voice is perfectly steady, ‘am I to understand that you suspect someone in this family of these horrible crimes?’

‘I suspect no-one and everyone,’ says Nelson portentously.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Someone killed those men and I think it was to protect the memory of Buster Hastings. Dieter Eckhart too. He was about to uncover the truth. I think someone killed to prevent that happening.’

She stares at him, her hands still clenched on the arms of her chair. An alarm goes off, making them both jump. Stella Hastings looks at her watch.

‘Time to check on Mother. Excuse me, Detective Chief Inspector. I won’t be long.’

And she goes out. Leaving Nelson to look out of the window, across the bay to the lighthouse. In front of him is a row of plants, one of which, he now realises, is planted in a German officer’s helmet.

*

Ruth is glad that she came. It is a beautiful afternoon, the sea sparkling in the sun. There is no snow left on the beach and it could almost be a summer day, if it were not for the sharp air that makes her catch her breath and wish she’d brought a scarf.

Craig is waiting for her at the foot of the slope. He is warmly dressed in a donkey jacket and black woolly hat.

‘Where’s Ted?’

‘He had to go back. Some domestic crisis. I said I would wait.’

‘That was kind of you.’

As Ruth follows Craig across the beach, she wonders about Ted’s domestic crisis. As far as she knows, he isn’t married or living with anyone. He’s a bit of an enigma, Irish Ted. He once told her that his name wasn’t even Ted.

Sandra had been happy to look after Kate for an hour longer. ‘No problem. Don’t worry so much, Ruth.’ But Ruth does worry. Tatjana’s words have left her feeling bruised and vulnerable. She has tried a couple of times to ring Tatjana back but her phone seems to be switched off. Is Ruth really such a terrible mother? She loves Kate more than her life but maybe this isn’t enough.

Certainly the whole maternal thing doesn't come easily to her, as it does to women like Michelle. Ruth never knows what to say to Sandra or to other mothers – one excruciating morning at a mother and baby group was enough to show her this. She doesn't know what baby food to buy or which car seat to avoid. She's never read a parenting magazine or watched *Supernanny*. She and Kate are having to make it up as they go along. And she'd thought she was doing all right, until the conversation with Tatjana.

But Tatjana has her own issues. Ruth knows this but she still shies away from talking properly to her friend. She has had her chances over the past weeks, but she has been too cowardly to take them. Tatjana will go home tomorrow and Ruth may never see her again.

They have left Broughton now and are crossing the beach where the barrels were found. The tide is out, rock pools stretch in front of them and Ruth can see the remains of the Victorian sea wall, like a green-slimed monster rising from the water, but something in the air perhaps, or in the wild calling of the seagulls, tells her that the tide may be about to turn. They'd better keep an eye on it. There's no way off this beach and the cliffs are too high to climb.

'How much further?' she asks.

'Just round the next headland.'

They have to climb over rocks, sharp with barnacles and crusted mussels, then in front of them lies another bay, a perfect semicircle scooped out of the sandstone cliff. And there, rearing out of the shallow water, is the unmistakeable hull of a ship. The water has eaten away at the wood and Ruth can see the blue sky through its prow but the shape is still there, a largish boat, about the size of the launch that took them to the lifeboat. It looks both menacing and strangely sad.

'Have you any idea how old it is?' asks Ruth, splashing forwards, despite the fact that she isn't (for once) wearing her wellingtons. The water is freezing.

'I don't know but I think about sixty or seventy years old by the shape of it.'

Ruth knows nothing about the shape of boats but this one looks as if it has been here forever. 'What makes you think it was a fire ship?' she asks.

‘There are barrels inside,’ says Craig. ‘Take a look.’

‘We’d better be quick,’ says Ruth, looking out to sea at the waves coming in towards them, shockingly fast.

‘Oh, we’ve got all the time in the world,’ says Craig.

*

Nelson is still staring out of the window when Stella comes back into the room.

‘How is she?’ he asks.

‘As well as can be expected. Peaceful.’ That note of resignation again. It casts a shadow on the bright afternoon, a shadow reflected on Stella’s face as she joins Nelson by the window.

All that is left of the garden at Sea’s End House is a thin strip of land, about a metre across, that runs alongside the house. The back garden has disappeared completely. But someone has taken trouble with the tiny piece of ground that is left. There is a narrow ribbon of lawn and someone has been tending the flowerbeds.

‘Strange to see the flowers coming up again after the snow,’ says Stella. ‘They’re hardier than you think, spring flowers.’

‘Are you a keen gardener?’ asks Nelson. He isn’t, though he quite likes mowing the lawn. Michelle loves garden centres; they’re her idea of heaven.

‘No, but we have someone who comes in. There’s not really enough for him to do now but he’s always looked after our garden. And his grandfather before him.’

Something stirs in Nelson’s brain as he looks at the spindly tulips pushing up out of the chalky soil.

‘Wasn’t he in the Home Guard? Your old gardener?’

‘Yes, Donald Drummond. He was devoted to Buster. And to Irene.’

As clear as if it is being amplified into the air around him, Nelson’s hears Hugh Anselm’s voice: *Donald said they were only filthy Jerries and would do the same to us.* Donald Drummond, the gardener.

And, like a kaleidoscope spinning before his eyes, so fast that the colours are blurred and the shapes indistinct, Nelson sees himself looking down from Archie Whitcliffe’s window. He is watching the gardener mow the lawn. Then, he sees himself at

Hugh Anselm's sheltered accommodation, admiring the grounds, so beautifully kept, recently mown, newly planted.

'What's the name of the gardener you have now? Donald's grandson?' he asks, so sharply that Stella steps back.

'Craig. I assumed you'd know him. He's an archaeologist too. One of Ruth's team.'

CHAPTER 30

The hull of the ship is so weathered and encrusted that it seems part of the rocks around it. Peering inside, Ruth sees pools of stagnant water, mussels like obscene growths clinging to the wood, a crab scuttling warily across the remains of a bench seat. But the basic structure remains, there is even a rudimentary cabin with the door bolted shut and, in the lowest part of the ship, partly submerged, two sealed barrels. Ruth leans forward and pulls at something trapped under one of the barrels. It looks like cotton wool, stained and discoloured by the water but smelling unmistakably of sulphur – gun cotton.

She looks at Craig who is peering over the side of the boat.

‘How come no-one’s found this before? It’s quite visible at low tide.’

‘Oh, people know about it. It’s even on the maps. I just don’t think that anyone has made the fire ship connection.’

It’s possible the boat was already a wreck when Hastings and his men primed it, thinks Ruth. It has probably sat in this lonely bay for years. Hastings would have known about it, she is sure that he knew every inch of this coast. He would have come down here in Syd Austin’s boat, probably with Ernst, the clever scientist, and filled the rotting hull with barrels of explosives, stuffed with the lethal cotton. They may even have had a way of setting off the explosion from a distance. The impact would have set the very sea on fire.

‘I wonder what’s in the cabin,’ she says. ‘It’s still locked.’

‘Let me have a look,’ says Craig, climbing over the side of the boat.

‘Funny,’ says Ruth. ‘The lock looks new. It’s not rusted at all.’

‘That’s odd.’ Craig comes to stand beside her. Even though the boat is lodged tight in the rocks, it still tilts slightly with the two of them aboard. The timbers creak and Ruth wonders if they will hold out.

The bolt slides back easily, too easily. Ruth feels the first, slight, frisson of alarm. She hears the sea thundering towards them and the gulls overhead. The tide has turned.

‘Have a look inside,’ says Craig.

Ruth turns, suddenly scared. It is a few seconds before she realises that she is looking down the barrel of a gun.

*

Nelson is ringing Ruth's number. No answer. Leaving Stella looking bemused, he runs out of the house, sprints to the end of the drive and along the cliff path. Ruth's car is in the car park. There is only one other car, a blue Nissan.

Nelson goes to the rail and looks down at the sea. The tide is coming in, crested waves rolling in towards land, smashing against the remains of the Victorian sea wall. There is no-one on the beach. At the spot where the bodies were found, police tape still flutters in the breeze. He looks at his watch. Five o'clock. A blameless time of day. Michelle will be cutting someone's hair, chatting about holidays. Rebecca will be home from school, eating toast and talking to her mysterious on-line friends. Clough will be asking who's going to the pub after work. Judy will be ignoring him. And Ruth? Ruth should be picking Katie up from the childminder. Instead, her car's here and she's nowhere to be seen. What had she said? *Craig, one of the field team, rang to say that they'd found a boat on the beach just beyond Broughton.*

He walks back to Sea's End House and takes the sloping path down to the beach. The same route taken by Captain Hastings and his men that moonless night. But this is a bright, spring afternoon. Surely Ruth cannot be in danger? He looks up at the house, the Thirties gothic folly, its sombre grey walls rising up out of the cliff. Inside that house, a woman is ill, perhaps dying. He remembers the shadow that he saw on Stella Hastings' face and shivers.

I am going to swim out beyond Sea's End Point. I am going to swim and swim until I can swim no more and then I am going to let the sea take me.

Danny West had swum to his death from this beach. Dieter Eckhart had been killed and his body thrown onto the rocks. Six murdered men were buried in the gap between the cliffs. Hugh Anselm had apparently thought that the beach at Broughton had an unwholesome atmosphere. Hardly surprising, given what he had witnessed there, but Nelson himself had felt something of the sort – though he could hardly have put it into words – the first

time that he looked down at the narrow bay, with the cliffs on one side and the tall grey house on the other. This place has known death before.

He walks to the point of the headland and looks out across the next cove. Deserted. This was the place where they found the barrels, he remembers. The cliffs are higher here, streaked yellow and grey. *The beach beyond Broughton*, Ruth said. He rings her number again. No answer. He tries her home and gets the answer phone. He doesn't know who he expects to answer anyway. The cat? Next he rings Judy, she's best at the local stuff.

'Judy? What's the next beach beyond Broughton?'

'Going north or south?' At least Judy never asks unnecessary questions.

'North.'

'Rockham. Beyond that, it's Cromer.'

'Can you get down to the beach from there?'

'Yes. There are some steps.'

'Can you meet me there as soon as possible? Bring Cloughie too.'

'Okay, boss.'

As Nelson clicks off his phone, a wave breaks over his feet. Soon Broughton will be cut off by the sea and Ruth is still on the beach somewhere. There's not a moment to lose.

*

'What are you playing at?' asks Ruth angrily.

'Get in the cabin, Ruth.' Craig is smiling, that gentle smile that she has always rather liked. He was her favourite of the field team, she remembers, because he never argued with her.

'You must be joking. Put that gun down.'

'If you don't, I'll kill you. Just like I killed Eckhart and the others.'

'You killed them?'

'Yes,' says Craig, still in that sweet, reasonable tone. 'I had to. I had to protect my grandfather's memory.'

'Your grandfather?'

'Donald Drummond. My mother's father. He was one of the Home Guard.'

Donald. The gardener, who presumably had the key to the

summer house. The one who had wanted to kill the Germans outright.

‘He was a fine man,’ says Craig. ‘He brought me up, you know. My father scarpered when I was a kid, Mum couldn’t really cope. But my grandparents, they were always there for me. Constant, steady. It was a different generation. A better generation.’

Ruth remembers Craig telling her that he was brought up by his grandparents. Thanks to them he can make oxtail soup. Is it thanks to them that he is also a murderer?

‘Granddad told me all about the war,’ Craig says. ‘And when I was old enough he told me about killing the Germans. It was them or us, he said. I understood. He was only doing his duty, fighting for his country.’

‘They killed them in cold blood!’

Craig turns on her furiously. ‘What do you know about it? Where would you be, you and all the bleeding heart liberals, if they hadn’t protected you? They stood on this coast line and they defended it. They defended it with their lives.’

‘Did you kill Archie and Hugh?’

‘I felt bad about Archie,’ says Craig. ‘He was a good man, but he was going to tell someone the secret. I did the gardening at the home and I saw how friendly he was getting with that carer, Maria. Then, when Nelson visited him, I knew it was time to act. I just popped up to his room after I’d finished in the grounds and sent him to sleep. It only took a few minutes. A merciful release, really. Archie hated getting old. Hated being in the home.’

‘What about Hugh? That wasn’t a merciful release.’

‘Hugh was a filthy communist. Granddad hated him. Anselm should have been a conchie and had done with it, but no, he had to go whingeing on about his conscience. You can’t afford a conscience in wartime. But Hugh always thought he was better than the rest of them. He had to go bleating to that German journalist. Telling our wartime secrets to a German! No, Hugh deserved everything he got.’

‘You stopped his stairlift?’

‘It was easy. I did the gardens there too. Got hold of the master key from that dipso warden and let myself in. Flicked the switch and there you go. I knew Hugh had a weak heart. I knew he’d kill himself trying to get free. Serves him right, in my opinion. Writing all those letters to the papers saying we ought to be

friends with the Germans. Friends! He made me sick.'

Craig looks down, smiling complacently. While his attention is momentarily diverted, Ruth presses the mobile phone in her pocket, touching random keys, hoping that she'll get through to someone, anyone. 'Help me,' she says aloud. 'I'm on the beach at Broughton. Craig's trying to kill me.'

'What are you doing?' Craig snaps to attention again, narrowing his eyes.

'Nothing.'

'Give me your phone.'

'I haven't got it.'

Craig comes closer and, pressing the gun against her head, pulls her hand from her pocket. He prises her fingers from the phone and throws it into the sea. Ruth hears it splash and, despite everything, can't resist an involuntary moan. Her phone! Her life is contained in her phone. Now it's at the bottom of the sea with the barnacles and rusting tin cans.

'Don't try anything else, Ruth. I'm a crack shot. My grandfather taught me.'

'Like he taught you gardening.'

'Exactly. My family have always looked after the gardens at Sea's End House. Even now, when there's hardly any garden left, I still tend it. I still care for it.'

Tend, care. Strange words for a murderer to use. Can this softly spoken man, an *archaeologist*, for God's sake, really have killed three people?

'I'm glad I killed that German,' Craig is saying now. 'He just wanted to dig dirt on Captain Hastings and his troop. He wasn't fit to lick their boots. And he was deceiving Clara. He told me that he was married, boasted about it almost, one night in the pub. So I waited for him that night. I had the keys to the garden room, you see. I'd done the garden earlier and I just waited. Eckhart was sitting in his car, sending a text to someone. Probably his wife. I asked for his help. Said my car had broken down. When we got to the car park I stabbed him and threw his body in the water.'

'Clara was devastated. You broke her heart.'

Craig laughs. 'She'll get over it. Can't have a Hastings marrying a German, destroying that fine English bloodline. No, Clara's destined for higher things. I might even marry her myself.'

In your dreams, thinks Ruth. The Hastings family would never let their daughter marry the gardener. To them, Craig, like his grandfather before him, is a servant. They would sooner let Clara marry Dieter Eckhart. Class is a stronger social adhesive than nationality. But Ruth decides not to say any of this to Craig. She has to keep him talking, get him to feel sorry for her.

‘Don’t kill me, Craig, I’ve got a baby. She needs me.’

‘Your baby! You’re never with her. She wouldn’t miss you, she never sees you.’

Another tribute to her mothering skills. But Ruth knows that Kate does need her and, for this reason alone, she’s not going to let herself be killed. She throws herself to one side, splintering the rotten timbers of the boat. Craig shoots but misses. The bullet lodges itself in one of the barrels. In seconds, the sea is on fire.

*

Nelson sees the smoke from the cliffs at Rockham. Judy and Clough haven’t arrived yet but he doesn’t wait. He leaves his car on the grass and makes for the steps, a rickety wooden structure marked by a sign saying, unambiguously, ‘Danger! Do not take the steps at High Tide. Danger of Drowning.’ Nelson, bounding down the slippery planks, sees a semicircle of shingle beach below. A line of grey rocks separates it from the next cove but the sea still hasn’t reached the bottom of the cliff. There may still be a chance to get to Ruth. The smoke spirals high in the air, like a distress flare. What the hell is happening? Is this Ruth’s way of attracting his attention? If so, it’s working ...

He runs across the beach, stumbling over the pebbles. Michelle once told him that this was good exercise. Now it feels more like torture, like one of those nightmares where you are running your hardest but get nowhere, where the ground turns into marshmallow and your feet become lead weights. Surely he should have reached the cliff by now. The waves are breaking over the furthest rocks. He’ll have to climb to get onto the next beach. Jesus, if only he was fitter. He should never have let his gym membership lapse.

His phone rings. He answers it, still running.

It’s Judy.

‘We’re at Rockham, boss. Where are you?’

‘On the beach.’

‘There’s a ship burning on the next beach. A real inferno. Black smoke everywhere.’

‘Any sign of Ruth?’

‘No, but we can’t get close enough to see.’

‘Call the coastguard. And the fire brigade.’

‘I already have. The coastguard says the tide’s coming in fast. You’d better get back up here.’

‘No. I’ve got to get to the next beach.’

He clicks off the phone. He has finally reached the rocks and sees that they are, in fact, the remains of a man-made wall, huge grey breeze blocks, covered in seaweed. He tries and fails to get a foothold, falling back onto the pebbles. The waves are crashing against the end of the wall. He should go back, wait for the coastguard. It’s not going to do either Michelle or Ruth any good if he gets killed. But he launches himself back at the wall, clinging on with his fingertips, hauling himself upwards by sheer willpower. Then, somehow, he’s there, standing on the very top of the sea wall. The next cove is filled with black smoke. He can’t see anything else at all. He pauses, catching his breath, and is hit in the small of the back by what feels like a tidal wave. He falls heavily, hitting his head on stone.

*

The force of the explosion sends Ruth flying. She lands on the beach, lying on her back, unable to move. In front of her is a solid sheet of flame. Where is Craig? Surely he must have been killed? Smoke stings her eyes and she can hardly breathe but she knows that she has to get off this beach. If the fire doesn’t get her, the tide will. She stands up, staggering slightly and heads towards the cliffs. She may just be able to climb round into the next cove. She falls, scraping her knee against stone and, almost accidentally, finds herself in the sea. She kneels in the water, thankful for the kindly cold, splashing water onto her burning face. The salt stings but even that is welcome; it proves that she is still alive.

Looking back, all she can see is blackness, even the flames have disappeared. The smell is overpowering. It must be the oil burning. Hastings’ long-forgotten booby-trap has gone off with a

vengeance. And where is Craig, the man who has dedicated himself to preserving Hastings' good name? If there's any justice, he'll have been blown sky high when the barrel first exploded. Killed by the devices planted by his beloved Home Guard. But Ruth doesn't believe in that sort of justice. She struggles on, waist deep in water. If she can only reach the sea wall, she can climb up, call for help. Surely someone will have seen the flames? Maybe the fire boat will save her life?

She's dizzy, disorientated. She doesn't realise that she has reached the wall until she literally walks into the first submerged rocks. She falls again, tasting salt water, but she manages to climb onto the rampart. A wave almost knocks her off her feet but she holds on, hands and knees across the seaweed and pointed barnacles. She's nearly there. Just a few more steps.

'Hallo, Ruth,' says a familiar voice.

CHAPTER 31

It's Craig. Somehow he is above her, standing on the highest part of the wall. His face is black with smoke but he seems unhurt. So much for poetic justice. He doesn't seem to have his gun but he is stronger than her and heavier. And he's already killed three people.

Ruth lies on the wet, slippery wall. Waves break over her, icy and relentless. She can see Craig getting closer, his sturdy archaeologist's boots, his combat trousers, soaking wet now, his hands clenching into fists. She can't do anything; she can't even stand because she knows that the waves would knock her down again. Her only chance is to ... as Craig comes within reach, she grabs his ankle and pulls.

'Bitch!'

He falls almost on top of her. His face is within inches of hers and she claws at him, desperate to dislodge him from the rocks. But he fights back, prising her fingers away and pushing, using all his body weight against her. She finds herself sliding. He's above her now. She can see a demonic white grin in his blackened face.

'Bye-bye, Ruth. I'll give your love to Ted and the others. Such a sad way to go. I'll tell them how I struggled to save you.'

He stamps heavily on her hand. She lets go, falling backwards into the churning sea. Surely this is it. The long descent into unconsciousness, the waters closing over her head, her life spiralling away from her – Kate, Nelson, her parents, Erik, Peter, everything. Even as she falls, she thinks: who will look after Kate? Please let it be Nelson rather than her parents. But, as she thinks of Kate, suddenly she feels a superhuman surge of strength and she kicks out, fighting against the tide. Her head emerges above the water, coughing and spluttering. She sees Craig, black against the sea wall and another wave crashes over her head. She fights again, striking out for the wall and this time, miraculously, her fingers close around something, a metal loop, probably for tying up a boat. The rusty iron cuts into her hand but she holds on as the waves buffet her against the rocks. Craig can't see her. The air is still full of smoke and he must be sure that she has gone under.

How long she hangs on she doesn't know. Again and again, the tide pulls her away and then throws her back against the wall. She is freezing, almost delirious with cold. She thinks that hypothermia might get her before Craig does. Maybe she should just let go, take her chances against the waves. Then she hears someone calling her. The voice seems to be coming from a long way off but, at the same time, speaking directly in her head.

'Ruth. Take my hand.'

It is Tatjana. Why she is here Ruth doesn't know. It is all mixed with another day, another fire, the flames of a burning town. Tatjana, a gun in her hand, saying, 'I have to do this, Ruth. Don't stop me.'

Now Tatjana too seems possessed of extraordinary strength. She hauls Ruth's waterlogged body above the water while Ruth herself scrabbles against the sheer stone. Then Ruth is lying face down on the sea wall and Tatjana is still pulling at her. 'Come on, we can't stay here.' Why not? All Ruth wants to do is lie down and sleep, even with the whole North Sea bearing down on top of her.

'Come on, Ruth. We need to get moving.'

*

Nelson is floating. The waters are dark and rather soothing. They speak to him in his mother's Irish voice. 'It's all right, son. You're safe now.' Then he hears another voice which, oddly enough, belongs to Cathbad.

'Don't give up now, Nelson. Fight it.'

Nelson opens his eyes and the sky explodes in front of him.

Another voice.

'Wake up, boss. We've got work to do.'

Jesus, now he's hallucinating about Clough. He shuts his eyes again and surrenders himself to the tide.

*

Tatjana is wearing a red jacket and Ruth follows it blindly, running back along the wall until they reach the foot of the cliff. Then Tatjana jumps into the next bay.

'Jump, Ruth.'

Ruth jumps. The water only comes to her knees but the tide is

strong, making it difficult to move forwards. Ruth fixes her eyes on the red jacket and struggles to put one foot in front of the other. It reminds her of that day with Trace, trying to cross the beach as the waters rose. But, unlike Trace, Tatjana keeps looking back, encouraging, cajoling. 'Come on, Ruth. You can do it. You have to do it. Kate needs you.' And, every time, that name spurs Ruth onwards. You have to do it. Kate needs you. She keeps going, half walking, half swimming. There's no sign of Craig. In the distance she can see Sea's End House, its flag fluttering gaily. If they can just reach that headland, surely they can call for help.

They are almost at the next wall when he appears, as if from nowhere. Maybe he was hiding in one of the caves. He knows this beach well, Ruth remembers. Now, without speaking a word, he powers towards them through the foaming waves. Ruth screams.

He throws himself at her, knocking her back under the water. She struggles, kicking out. Then she feels him being lifted away from her. Tatjana must be helping her. She can hear screams, shouting, and another noise, a great mechanical whirring, directly above them.

'Leave her alone!'

Ruth wrenches herself free and swims towards the noises, the waves suddenly seem incredibly high. Now, other hands are pulling her up onto the sea wall. Tatjana is next to her, putting her arm round her. Craig is still in the water but, as she watches, people are reaching down to him too. A helicopter circles above them, churning the bay into a whirlpool. Now Judy is there, putting handcuffs onto Craig.

'He tried to kill me,' says Ruth.

'I know,' says Judy. 'I saw.'

'You don't know the half of it.'

The police launch appears beside the wall, bobbing in the choppy water. Judy climbs in with Craig, and Tatjana and Ruth follow, falling clumsily into its bows. Now they are heading back across the cove. People wrap foil blankets round them and try to give them hot drinks but Ruth suddenly feels exhilarated, invincible. She starts to laugh. Judy looks at her in concern.

'It's okay, Ruth. You're safe now.'

But Ruth can't stop laughing, it's all mixed up – joy, fear, exhaustion, and an overwhelming sense of relief that she isn't going to die after all. Not this time.

Tatjana puts her hand on Ruth's arm.

'Ruth. I'm sorry about earlier.'

'That's okay. You saved my life.'

'You saved yourself.'

'How did you get here anyhow?'

'You rang me.'

'I just pressed random buttons,' says Ruth, 'you must have been the last number I called.'

'Well, I thought you sounded like you needed help.'

'Thank you.'

'You should have rung the police,' says Judy, slightly reprovingly. She is sitting beside Craig who is huddled in his blanket, staring into space. Hard to imagine that a few minutes ago he seemed inhuman, a monster possessed of terrible powers.

'I'm used to taking the law into my own hands,' says Tatjana.

She looks at Ruth and smiles.

*

When Nelson opens his eyes he is being carried in some sort of hammock. The sky unfurls at a tremendous speed, full of seagulls, black against white. Now he is surrounded by people and light, noises like computer games, the sound of an engine, a siren, fading away into the distance.

'Jesus, boss. I thought you were a goner.'

Nelson focuses his eyes on Clough's face. His sergeant is dripping wet, soot-stained and, unaccountably, smiling.

Another face swims into view – kindly, middle-aged, unknown.

'Just lie back, son. Don't overdo it.'

'Where am I?'

'In an ambulance. On the way to hospital. Don't worry, you'll be fine. We just need to check you over.'

'Where's Cathbad? I thought I heard his voice.'

'He's not here, boss,' says Clough. 'It was just me and Johnson. She went for help and I saw you fall into the water. I had a hell of a time getting you out.'

'This young man saved your life,' says the ambulance man. 'He pulled you out of the sea. By the time we got there, he'd already given you the kiss of life.'

Nelson closes his eyes again. 'Just kill me now,' he says. It was

the end of summer. There were crops in some of the fields but no-one to do the harvesting. Some of the volunteers tried to organise teams to cut the hay but no-one really knew what they were doing and, besides, most of the farms had been burnt to the ground.

The hotel became uncomfortable as the weather got colder. At night the wind whistled through the broken glass and Ruth shivered in her thin sleeping bag. She knew she would have to go home soon; the academic year was starting and, in a way, she wanted to go back, to sleep in a proper bed, to watch television, to eat something other than rice and beans. But a far stronger part of her wanted to stay. How can they leave when there are still bodies piled high, waiting to be identified? Every week brought news of a new mass grave. Erik was everywhere, riding in an open truck like Che Guevara, a scarf over his mouth to keep out the dust, spurring the volunteers on, arguing with the officials, handing out mugs of stolen wine to his weary troops, praising, encouraging, sympathising. He always had a special word for each of them. When he saw Ruth, his ice-blue eyes would soften and he'd say, 'What would I do without my Ruthie?' And Ruth, cold, exhausted, sickened by the suffering that she saw every day, would glow in the warmth of his approval.

Tatjana grew very quiet as summer turned to autumn. Sometimes Ruth thought that she had given up hope of finding Jacob. But she still cried every night and, when people came from the south, she still questioned them. Only now it seemed as if she did not expect to get any answers.

In late September a small group, including Ruth and Tatjana, travelled to a town near Mostar, the capital of the new Herzegovina. There were rumours of a grave near a large refugee camp. Children from the camp had apparently been found playing with human bones.

It was Ruth's first sight of one of these notorious camps, and as their truck moved slowly through the line of tents, children running excitedly after them, she was relieved that it wasn't as awful as she'd feared. There was order, a Red Cross van handing out food, even some attempts at normal life: a group of boys playing football, women hanging out clothes, children playing in a stream.

Next to her, Tatjana was rigid with tension. When one of the

children jumped on the side of the truck, she screamed.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Ruth.

‘Nothing.’

On a hillside to the north of the camp they found their first bones. Heavy rainfall had dislodged the earth and human bones were indeed lying in the open and even floating in the stream that bordered the camp. For three days the archaeologists sorted and catalogued and attempted to identify. This was farmland and there were animal bones mixed in with the human, but all the evidence pointed to a massacre – men, women and children, their bodies thrown into a shallow pit.

As the days went by Tatjana became more and more withdrawn. She worked efficiently enough but in the evenings she sat on her own, wrapped in her coat, apparently deep in thought.

Then, on the fourth day, Ivan, their driver, came bursting into their camp with the news that a group of rebel Serbs were in the area. They had apparently burnt the church and were on their way to the refugee camp. As he spoke they watched the smoke rise up above the trees, a dark cloud in the evening sky.

Ruth remembers that she had never felt more frightened in her life. She had lived for twenty-five years without ever once experiencing physical danger. She wasn’t really one for extreme sports; the nearest she had come to death was probably eating a dodgy kebab from Bilal’s All Night Burger Stall. And now, a band of deadly ruffians was on its way – people who would not baulk at the murder of civilians. She remembers that she had actually been sick, dry-retching at the back of the tents, while Erik and the others packed their gear into the truck.

Erik had been calmness itself. Even now Ruth feels a twinge of vicarious pride as she remembers how Erik had insisted on going down to the refugee camp. ‘Who knows, our presence there may save lives. We are connected to the International Aid Effort, after all. They can hardly kill us all in cold blood.’

Ivan had clutched his arm, his normally ruddy face white with terror.

‘You don’t understand, Professor Anderssen. It’s ...’ And he said a Serbian name which meant nothing to Ruth.

But it obviously meant something to Tatjana. She stepped forward out of the shadows and started questioning Ivan in

Bosnian. Ruth remembers that Ivan had grown more and more desperate as he confronted Tatjana. It was as though whatever he had seen in the burning village was not as terrifying as this small, dark-haired woman.

All night they waited at the camp. Erik told them to make a fire. 'Throughout the ages, it's always been the same. Fire comforts us and it warns our enemies. It is both the flame of the hearth and the white heat of battle.' So they had gathered around Erik's bonfire, as close to the flames as they dared. First it was just the archaeologists then, slowly, the refugees began to join them, so that the circles around the fire expanded like ripples on a pond. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to get close to the hearth that night.

Except Tatjana. Early on, Ruth realised that she was missing but she had been scared to leave Erik and the comfort of the fire. Then, as the night drew on, Ruth knew that she had to find her friend. She went back to the archaeologists' tents on the edge of the hillside and found Tatjana getting into the truck, a petrified Ivan beside her and a gun in her hand.

'Tatjana! What are you doing?'

'Stay out of this, Ruth,' said Tatjana, pale but very calm. 'It's nothing to do with you.'

'What are you doing with that gun? What's happening?' And, eventually, Tatjana had told her. She had recognised the name of the rebel leader. It was the man who had killed Jacob.

'What are you going to do?'

But she knew.

'I'm going to kill him,' Tatjana had said calmly.

There was that look in her eyes again. That burning intensity, painful to witness.

'I have to do this, Ruth. Don't stop me.'

And so Ruth hadn't stopped her. She hadn't known what to say to her friend – had not been able to find the words of reason, of understanding, of comfort. So she had let Tatjana go. And when she heard in the morning that the rebel leader was dead, shot while he slept, she had known that she had failed.

She still feels that she failed. But now she understands. She understands only too well.

CHAPTER 32

May

Kate must be getting heavier, thinks Ruth. It's been quite a strain to hold her throughout the short service and now, at the end, people seem to want to take endless photographs. Her arms ache as she hoists her daughter higher in her arms.

'Hold her up, Ruth. That's it. Just a bit more. Smile, Kate!'

Ruth's face aches too, as she tries to maintain a sunny, maternal expression. She still doesn't know why she let Nelson talk her into this. Ever since Craig's arrest and his own near-drowning, Nelson has been obsessed with the idea that Kate should be christened in a Catholic church.

'But, Nelson,' Ruth had protested, 'I don't believe in any of that stuff. The body and blood, the saints, life after death.'

'You didn't believe in Cathbad's rubbish either but you still went ahead with the naming day. What's the difference?'

Ruth can think of several differences (she couldn't be accused of holding the naming day ceremony just to get Kate into a pagan primary school, for example) but, in the end, she gave in. Nelson has been uncharacteristically depressed after the events at Broughton Sea's End. Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't been able to save Ruth or maybe it is just the realisation that he owes his life to Clough, but Nelson has been anxious and ill-at-ease. He rings Ruth several times a day to check on Kate and nags her continually about the baby's welfare.

'I'm doing this on my own, Nelson. We agreed. Remember?'

But, in the end, the deciding factor for Ruth was that, if she made Nelson and Michelle godparents, they could have a formal role in Kate's life. When it comes down to it, she is slightly scared of doing the whole thing on her own. Those terrible moments in the water when she saw not her own life, but Kate's, unfold in front of her, made her realise that it was dangerous for Kate's welfare to depend so entirely on one person. She is not particularly scared of dying but she is terrified of leaving Kate on her own. So she agreed to have Kate baptised into the Catholic Church, only making the stipulation that Father Hennessey

should come from Sussex to perform the service. She has also made a will, naming Nelson and Michelle as Kate's guardians in the event of her death. She doesn't feel any qualms about leaving Kate in Michelle's care. She's a good mother and, this way, Kate will be able to be brought up with her half-sisters. Far better than a sterile existence with Ruth's parents in South London.

Nelson explained to Michelle that Ruth had been brought up a Catholic and had decided on the christening 'just to be on the safe side, belt and braces job'. Michelle had accepted this without question. She is spectacularly uninterested in religion and has never questioned Nelson's decision to have their children baptised as Catholics. If you have to be something, why not Catholic? That's her view. At least you can dress girls beautifully for their First Holy Communion.

Michelle herself is dressed beautifully today. She is wearing a pink flowered dress and beaded cardigan. Ruth, in dark trousers and a white shirt, feels distinctly outclassed. At least Cathbad, complete with cloak, evens things up a bit. Ruth decided that it would just be too weird to have only Nelson and Michelle as godparents, so she has asked Cathbad and Shona as well. The more the merrier. And, as Father Hennessey pointed out, three of the four are actually baptised Catholics.

'I'm not exactly a practising Catholic,' said Cathbad, with modest understatement.

'Oh you can never get away from the Catholic church,' smiled Father Hennessey. 'You be a devil worshipper if you like, you'll still be a lapsed Catholic to us.'

Tatjana had called Cathbad a devil worshipper, Ruth remembers. She never worked out whether this was a joke or not. She does know, though, that Tatjana has moved a long way from the Catholicism of her childhood. The night after Tatjana came to Ruth's rescue on the beach, appearing on the sea wall like one of the Norse water spirits so beloved of Erik, they had sat up late into the night, talking. Tatjana told Ruth that, in her quest to come to terms with Jacob's death, she had run the gamut of spirituality.

'I've tried them all – past life regression, séances, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, I even belonged to some made-up church called The Fellowship of The Fisherman. Rick was very good about it. He wanted us to have our own kids but I couldn't bear to. I didn't

want a child. I wanted Jacob. If anything happened to Kate, having another child wouldn't make you forget her, would it?"

'No,' said Ruth, touching wood surreptitiously.

'I wanted to get in touch with my little boy again but, of course, it was impossible. Oh, I had all those so-called mediums saying, "I've got a little boy here asking for his mummy." Complete frauds, the lot of them. Not that I wasn't taken in for a while, but Rick helped me to see what charlatans they were. They pick up on your grief and they feed off it, like vampires. No, the only thing that helped was finally finding his grave. Erik was right about that, you know. We need to see the burial place. It's a fundamental human requirement.'

'So you did find it.'

'Yes. I met this wonderful woman, Eva Klonowski, who runs the International Commission on Missing Persons. She's a forensic archaeologist and she's been in Bosnia since the Nineties. She helped me. They're using all sorts of new technologies there, you know – satellite imagery and spectral analysis – and they're still finding bones all the time. We found a grave that looked like it might be in the right place and from the right time. The bodies had been moved several times but Eva helped me get DNA testing done. They don't fund it, you see, except in special circumstances. The tests proved that it was Jacob and my parents. I buried my parents there, on the hillside, but I had Jacob's bones cremated and I brought them home with me. Do you think that's weird?"

'No.'

'I'm glad, because those ashes are my greatest comfort. I keep them in a casket on my bedside table at home and I've even got some in here.' She touched the gold locket around her neck. 'You understand, don't you?"

Yes, Ruth did understand. She now has an insight into the ferocious world of motherhood. She thought that this was the first time she had spoken to Tatjana, really spoken to her, since the day in the pine forest. She was glad to have her friend back, to have salvaged something from the wreckage of Bosnia. But the next day Tatjana had left to go back to America and Ruth does not know if she will ever see her again.

So, Tatjana is not among the small group gathered in the characterless modern church of St Peter and St Paul. Judy isn't there either; she is on her honeymoon. A week ago, Ruth

attended her wedding, an elaborate affair in a far grander church. Judy had looked beautiful, her round-faced prettiness transformed into something quite spectacular. Her colleagues had formed a guard of honour outside the church and there had been the obligatory jokes about stop-and-search, truncheons and handcuffs.

Ruth didn't have much chance to talk to Judy. The reception, in a four-star hotel, was packed and she was stuck with Judy's colleagues from the station. Nelson was there, with Michelle, but he was on a more important table. He looked fed up, fiddling with his tie and glowering at the jokes about the police force. Michelle, of course, looked gorgeous in exactly the right kind of hat.

After the meal there was a disco. Ruth dutifully danced with the policewomen, who had commandeered the dance floor. She even managed an embarrassed shuffle with Clough (Trace having refused to dance). But as 'YMCA' segued into Kylie, she escaped, looking for some air and a chance to take off her shoes. After trying several doors, all of which seemed to open onto conference rooms, she eventually found French windows leading to a terrace. She had sunk down with relief onto a stone seat but, to her surprise, she wasn't alone. Judy was there, looking out over the landscaped grounds, mysterious in the moonlight.

'Congratulations,' Ruth had said. She felt slightly awkward. What do you say to the bride, after all? And it felt wrong to see her there, by herself, in her big white dress. A bride is meant to be in company, isn't that why she has attendants, to ensure that she is never on her own? 'It's a lovely wedding. I'm sure you and Darren will be very happy together.'

Judy had laughed, rather oddly. Her eyes were glittering and her head was askew. 'Are you? I'm not.' And she had gathered up her skirts and gone back to join the conga.

What had Judy meant? Ruth doesn't like to guess. She has had enough uncertainty to last her a lifetime. If Judy, marrying her childhood sweetheart, isn't happy, what hope is there for the rest of them?

Certainly Clara isn't happy. Ruth catches a glimpse of her at the back of the church, pale and pretty in a grey shift dress. Ruth invited Clara to the christening because she seems genuinely fond of Kate. Also, Ruth feels rather bad about having suspected her,

even briefly, of the murders. She now sees that Clara is just a rather directionless young woman, a child almost, still mourning her first real love. But she has, at least, been on a few archaeological digs and is, apparently, considering going back to university to study forensic archaeology. Ruth hopes that Clara's subsequent career will be less eventful than her own.

*

Irene Hastings is dead. She died just as Craig attempted another murder to protect the family name and Nelson fought for his life in the water. Nelson still feels slightly uneasy about the expression that he saw on Stella Hastings' face that afternoon. She had known that her mother-in-law was not going to survive. Had she hastened her death? How much did Irene really know about the murders? She had visited Archie Whitcliffe and Hugh Anselm. She had been close to all the members of the Home Guard, including Craig's grandfather who, apparently, was 'devoted' to her. She had known enough, certainly, to plant hardy annuals in a German officer's helmet. Could Irene have colluded with Craig? Who did the gardening scissors really belong to? And who had warned Craig that Hugh Anselm's troublesome conscience was stirring once more?

But Nelson keeps these doubts to himself. The case is closed and Whitcliffe is satisfied. Craig will be charged with the murders of Archibald Whitcliffe, Hugh Patrick Anselm and Dieter Eckhart. He has made a full confession.

Archie was given a proper military funeral, conducted by Father Tom, and is buried in the graveyard at Broughton. There may still be an enquiry into the deaths of the six German soldiers. Hugh's film, so carefully preserved all those years, has been sent to the CPS but there is a feeling that, as all the people concerned are now dead, there is little point in pursuing the case. The German families seem remarkably lacking in desire for vengeance; all they want are their loved ones' bodies back. As Erik knew, there is a powerful comfort in having a grave to visit. Ruth sent the rosary to the family of Manfred Hahn, in whose hand it had been found. Manfred was, presumably, the man who had cried out to God before he was shot, a prayer heard by the young Hugh Anselm. Manfred Hahn's granddaughter sent Ruth a

nice letter saying that they would treasure the rosary forever. Ruth hopes that Hugh would approve of this *entente cordiale*.

So the reputation of Buster Hastings, the 'old devil' who 'fought the good fight', may well survive. But the grandchildren of the men in the Home Guard – Clara, Craig and Whitcliffe – they will remember.

Whitcliffe is buying Maria a flat.

'He says it's what his grandfather would have wanted,' Nelson told Ruth.

'Well, he's probably right. He can't be such a bad bloke after all.'

Nelson has his own suspicions. Could Superintendent Whitcliffe be the father of Maria's little boy? Could this be why Archie left the code in her hands, knowing that it would find its way to the police force and, maybe, unite George's parents in the process? Is this the meaning of the cryptic note in Archie's will? *Gerald, I'm so proud of you and I know you'll do the right thing*. Nelson doesn't know and Whitcliffe isn't telling. But, one way or another, he can't quite summon up his old hatred and contempt for his boss. It's a shame really. He misses it.

Sea's End House is being knocked down. The council has declared it unsafe, and though Jack Hastings is threatening to take the matter to the European Court of Human Rights he actually seems resigned to losing his family home. His mother's death hit him hard and, on the few occasions that Ruth has seen him since, he seemed subdued, shrunken even, a small man once more. He no longer talks about an Englishman's home being his castle and has even mentioned the idea of retiring to Spain. Ruth herself feels a pang for the sinister grey house high on the cliff. She can't forget the night she spent there – the snow falling on the beach, Nelson's face in the candlelight, the clock striking midnight. She still has that odd time-slip feeling; the sense that if, during the course of dinner, she had ventured out of the house, she would have seen not the snow-covered cars and the flashing hazard lights on the coast road, but Captain Hastings and his men taking the sloping path to the beach; seen the boat being rowed ashore, heard the shots in the long-vanished summer house, watched as the shallow grave was dug under the cliff. She thinks too of Tony, Jack's elder brother, the child who watched from the turret window. Tony, dead of cancer in his thirties. Was it this

death which haunted Irene Hastings or the deaths of the six men, killed on her husband's orders?

Cathbad wants a picture of himself holding Kate. Ruth hands her over thankfully. Her arms have gone numb. Cathbad holds Kate face outwards, like a football trophy. Ruth has noticed that a lot of men do this. Shona takes his photograph, then has one of herself with Cathbad and the baby. They look like a proper nuclear family, if you ignore Cathbad's cloak. Ruth notices Phil looking distinctly put out. Shona, Ruth knows, would love to have a baby but Phil feels that his years of fatherhood are behind him. She wonders if Shona will be able to persuade him. Certainly Phil is still besotted with her, following her round like a puppy, carrying her hot-pink pashmina like a badge of office.

Cathbad hands Kate back to Ruth. 'What about a picture of you with all the godparents?' he says. 'I'll get Harry and Michelle.'

'It's okay, thanks,' says Ruth. All these photographs are too much for her, though Kate seems to be enjoying them no end. Ruth had wanted a quiet service, no pomp and ceremony, just a few friends and a drink afterwards. But Nelson has arranged for them all to have lunch at The Phoenix. And, though Father Hennessey has obviously tried to keep things low-key – he isn't wearing robes, for example – there is something somehow grandiose about the ceremony itself, even when pared to the bone.

'Do you reject Satan ... and all his works ... and all his empty promises?'

Ruth noticed that Cathbad kept rather quiet when this question was addressed to the godparents. Nelson, though, answered in ringing tones. 'I do.' Just like a wedding.

'Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?'

Tricky one, Ruth thought. But Nelson answered up again. 'I do.' Beside him, Michelle and Shona murmured supportively and Cathbad looked enigmatic.

Father Hennessey lit a candle – shades of Cathbad's sacred fire – and gave it to Nelson to hold. Then he had taken the holy water and fairly doused Kate's head in it. Ruth had been amazed; she

had been expecting a few polite drops. Kate had been too shocked even to cry. Ruth thought of her parents, who believe in Full Immersion for Adults. They are not here today, for them this ceremony would be no better than the pagan naming day. Worse probably. Pagans can be laughed off as harmless eccentrics. The Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins – that's serious stuff.

'Kate Scarlet. I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Ruth just hopes that all the spirits are satisfied.

Outside the sunshine is warm on their faces and the trees are full of blossom. Summer is almost here. Kate's first summer.

Nelson goes off to organise the cars and Ruth finds herself next to Michelle.

'She was so good,' says Michelle. 'She didn't even cry.'

'She likes all the attention.'

'My two were just the same.'

Michelle stretches out a casual finger and strokes Kate's hair, the little whorl that always goes in the same way, stubbornly against the tide.

'Funny,' says Michelle. 'Harry's got a bit of hair that grows just the same way.'

And, all afternoon, through the lunch and the speeches and the general outpouring of goodwill, Ruth sees Michelle's face and its slowly dawning suspicion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Broughton Sea's End is an imaginary place. There is, however, a Lincolnshire town called Moulton Sea's End which is lucky enough to be home to my dear friends John and Colin. I have borrowed part of the name but nothing else. Several towns on the east Norfolk coast are genuinely threatened by coastal erosion, Happisburgh in particular.

The invasion story is also totally fictitious. There were numerous invasion scares during the Second World War and for details of these I am indebted to two books by James Hayward: *The Bodies on the Beach* and *Myths and Legends of the Second World War*. Thanks to BBC 2's *Coast* for the listening post and to Dr Matt Pope who first had the idea about the bodies on the beach.

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Love and thanks always to my husband Andrew and to our children, Alex and Juliet.

Elly Griffiths, 2010

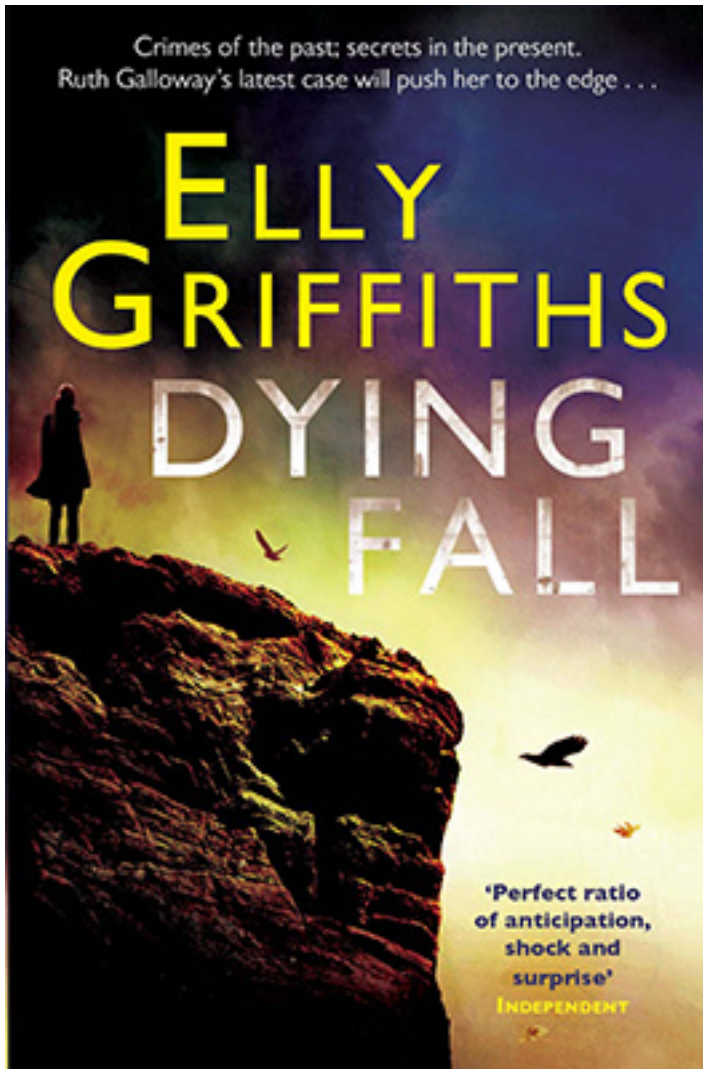
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Night falls on Halloween eve, the museum in King's Lynn is preparing for an unusual event – the opening of a coffin excavated from the site of a medieval church. But when archaeologist Dr Ruth Galloway arrives to supervise, she finds the

museum's curator lying dead beside it.

Ruth and Detective Inspector Nelson are forced to cross paths once again when he's called in to investigate the murder, and their past tensions are reignited. And as Ruth becomes further embroiled in the case, she must decide where her loyalties lie – a choice that her very survival depends on.



Ruth's old friend Dan Golding thinks he has made a discovery

that will change archaeology forever – but he needs Ruth's help. Then, Dan is killed in a fire, leaving Ruth with one clue: the tomb of the Raven King.

DCI Nelson is also rediscovering the past. He meets his friend Sandy Macleod, now at Blackpool CID, who tells him there are mysterious circumstances surrounding Dan's death. A Neo-Nazi group at Dan's University has been making threats and could be involved.

Many of Dan's colleagues seem fearful and have secrets to hide. Ruth is drawn into the mystery, and where she goes, so does her daughter, Kate. This time, it's not just Ruth's life at risk.



Forensic archaeologist Ruth Galloway has excavated a body from the grounds of Norwich Castle, a forbidding edifice that was once a prison.

She believes the body may be that of infamous Victorian murderess Jemima Green. Called Mother Hook for her claw-like hand, Jemima was hanged in 1867 for the murder of five children in her care.

DCI Harry Nelson has no time for long-dead killers. Immersed in the case of three infants found dead, one after the other, in their King's Lynn home, he's convinced that a family member is responsible, though others on his team think differently.

Then a child goes missing. Could the abduction be linked to the long-dead Mother Hook? Ruth is pulled into the case, and back towards Nelson.

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